ONE PIECE Novel
Ace's Story Side A
Formation of the Spade Pirates

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Summary

Washed up on the shores of a deserted island at the edge of the East Blue Sea, two men from different backgrounds unite in their shared thirst for adventure. One of them, Portgaz D. Ace,

will follow in his infamous father's footsteps as the captain of a pirate crew. The other, Masked Deuce, becomes the reluctant first member of Ace's Spade Pirates. Survival is not enough for these seafaring buccaneers, as together they seek treasure, excitement, and a route to the New World.

Prologue

His father was no longer alive.

He was executed by the Navy before he could see the birth of his son.

All he left behind was a woman who would become a mother, and the baby she bore within her.

The father's name was consigned to secrecy.

The mother hid out in her hometown to protect

the baby to come .

Then, at last, unbeknownst to anyone, she brought new life into the world.

Baterilla, in the South Blue

What a trick of fate.

It was on this island that she gave birth to a child with the blood of the King of the Pirates.

Chapter One

I fell off the straight and narrow path of a

respectable life, so I decided to go out to sea instead.

I thought that out among the infinite blue waves I would find a world where I could truly be alive. The world of adventure I dreamed of as a kid. That world of dreams, when all I had was a book and my imagination. And yet here I was, in that very world.

A desert island under palm trees. Blazing sun. White sands. An empty stomach. All of it was real. The only thing marking the passage of time was the gentle lapping of waves on the shore. I was stuck on the kind of beautiful island you read about in stories, listening to the raucous cries of the seabirds.

Ever since I was a

boy, I've wanted to chronicle an adventure in a book. I'd prefer it to be a book like *Brag Men*, if possible. That's my favorite book.

It's a collection of journals from the explorers of the distant past. One particularly famous section tells of Little Garden, the island of giants. Adults made fun of it, claiming that the stories were all lies,

but as a child I always wondered, *How can they be so sure?*

I wanted to see it for myself, rather than believing someone else's uninformed opinion on the matter. And I wasn't going to decide what was the truth until I had the chance to see it. That was the kind of person I wanted to be.

That part of me has never changed. Even

when that attitude landed me on an uninhabited island that was said to be inescapable.

East Blue. The unbelievably beautiful island of Sixis.

Someone once called it “the island closest to Heaven.”

Why did they say that? Because once you’ve set foot on it, you’ll die before you

escape.

Across the emerald green shallows, I could see a unique kind of sea current. It pulled anyone on its periphery toward the island, like an antlion of the waves. It ensured that anyone who reached the island was forced to enjoy the final vacation of their life.

I exhaled deeply and sat down in the shade of

a palm tree so I could gaze out desolately at the water. Three days had already passed since I got here. It was the worst vacation I'd ever had.

The seabreeze caressed my cheeks, but the acrid tang of the brine in my nose was the unpleasant reality that accompanied it. That, and the sight of a previous visitor to the

island: a skeleton resting nearby.

Judging from its clothes, the skeleton had once been a pirate. A rusty pistol was clutched in its bony hand, and fancy rings glittered on its fingers. It was all very dispiriting to look upon. No weapons or jewels were going with you to the afterlife.

The only thing you left behind in this world was

bones…

"We've had a rough time of it, haven't we?" I muttered.

I felt like I had to, or else I would forget how to use my own voice. If I was going to wind up like him in the near future, I could at least offer up a bit of consolation…

"I must be an idiot…"

I leaned back against the tree and closed my

eyes. My throat was parched, so I moistened it with a pittance of saliva. Without realizing it, I'd come under the assumption that I wasn't going to survive. That was a bad sign.

"C'mon, let's at least dig a grave. I'll give you a hand."

"A grave... Yeah, good idea... Let's do that..."

It wasn't fair to the

skeleton to leave it to the elements. Best to dig a grave, give him a proper resting place. Whoever's idea that was, it was a good one.

I swallowed again. That throat of mine was dreadfully dry.

I needed to look for water. I hadn't had a decent drink in two whole days. If only there were coconuts on this palm tree. Were there

monkeys in the jungle behind me? Or was it just the wrong season? Sadly, there was not a single fruit to be seen.

The calls of the seabirds were as raucous as ever. I honed my ears on the lapping repetition of the waves. So much water in the sea, and not a drop to drink...

"Who said that?!"

My eyes popped open and I bolted upright. I

was alone on this perfectly empty island, but I could have sworn that I'd just traded words with someone else.

And then I heard the scrunch of sand under shoes. Shining black boots, as a matter of fact. There was a man standing before me. The way he was silhouetted against the glittering reflection of the sea, it

was almost as though he were glowing with holy light.

“Oh, hello. It's nice to make your acquaintance,” the man said politely, with a proper bow. This seemed overly cordial, considering that we were nowhere near any kind of society.

“My name is Ace. I was just enjoying a little stroll along the beach.

How do you do?”

The man had a pleasant, friendly smile. His orange hat was nearly blinding in the dappled light beneath the tree. I had to squint as I looked up at him, so he squatted down to my level. A crimson ornament swayed gently around his neck.

Once we were at eye level, I could see that he was a young man with

freckles. He was probably around my age, in fact. Something about his lean physique seemed to conjure the sense of chronicles of adventure, and the sound of waves.

This was how I first met Portgaz D. Ace.

I was unable to speak from the shock. All I could do was stare with bulging eyes. Having landed on an

uninhabited island, the last thing I expected to find was an inhabitant. The instant he came into view, my brain was already grasping at the word “rescue”.

The man — the savior — who called himself Ace continued, “Sorry to trouble you like this, but my ship’s busted. Help a guy out?”

“You’re in the same predicament as I am!”

Inside my head, I simply screamed. *Aaaaaaaaah!*

In the whole wide world, and all of its vast seas, how could someone else coincidentally shipwreck on the shore of this ill-fated island at the same time I did? What were the odds? I was witness to a miracle, and it was the crappiest, most useless miracle ever.

Listlessly, I muttered, “My ship was wrecked in the last storm, too. It went down as a donation to Davy Jones, along with most of the cargo. What can I say? Storms put me in a charitable mood.”

My lips were so cracked and dry that they bled as I spoke. It had been too long since I had talked to another person.

Davy Jones, by the way, was an old pirate. Legend says that he was cursed by the devil and lives on the seafloor even to this day. So everything that sinks beneath the waves becomes his treasure. Nobody actually believes he's alive, though; that's the thing with legends. In fact, if he were alive, I'd take back my contribution. *Hey pal,*

that was actually an accident. Would you mind giving back my stuff?

"I see… Guess we've both had a rough time of it," Ace grinned. The guy sure seemed happy-go-lucky for being shipwrecked.

I realized that his attitude was actually grating on me. Partly it was disbelief that he could smile in a

situation like this. The other part was that I didn't like that he was saying the exact same thing to me that I'd been saying to a skeleton moments ago.

But I couldn't hold it against him. In an instant, I readjusted my mood. The guy probably had no idea yet of how terrible this island might be. He was an amateur shipwreckee. *What the*

heck is an amateur shipwreckee? Hunger and thirst were making my thoughts fuzzy.

"I've been here... for three days now," I murmured, softly but firmly.

That's right. I've lasted for three whole days. Could *you* do that? It felt like I was both boasting and challenging him to do the same.

“It’s the sixth day for me. I win.”

“Whaaaaat?!” I yelped. He was worse off than me.

“Anyway, that’s not important. I'm building a raft, but it's not going well. Would you help me build a ship to get us off this island?” Ace asked cheerfully.

He explained that he’d built two or three impromptu rafts for

escape attempts, but nothing worked. He was getting desperate when he happened across me on the beach.

Work together to build a ship…

It was, in a way, an intriguing suggestion. But ultimately it would mean trusting, and tying my fate to, a complete stranger I'd just met moments ago.

Of course, the more

manpower, the better. But the odds were entirely against us. This was a small desert island. There was a limit to its resources. It would be hard enough for me to survive on my own, let alone sustaining two grown men. Water for two men. Food for two men. A ship big enough to support two men. And we had to scrounge up all of this out of

nothing? It was ridiculous.

What if we only found enough food for a single person? Would I have to split provisions with a total stranger? In fact, splitting them would be the ideal circumstance. What if one of us tried to hoard it all? What if he made the bold and friendly suggestion to cooperate, only to betray me when

it counted most?

People turn on each other, even in the best of times. And this was a life-or-death situation. No one else was watching us. Could I really trust the other man who was here with me?

So, no, I wasn't going to help him. I didn't need a companion. From the moment I set out to sea, I was determined to

make it on my own, without anyone else's help. At least I wouldn't have to worry about anyone betraying me.

But then I realized that when I first saw Ace, and when he spoke to me, a part of me felt hope. It was pathetic. That part of me was weak.

I thought he'd come to rescue me.

Even though that

couldn’t be the case.

My excitement rapidly subsided. It felt like I was outside myself, observing my life as though I were a stranger. Despite all my self-determination, once I was alone on a deserted island, I was happy to come across another person. So much for that.

It hadn’t lasted long, though. There was a

certain kind of loneliness I felt around others that I didn't feel when alone. Paradoxically, once I was with another person, no matter the circumstances, I found myself facing the emptiness inside myself.

"By the way, I didn't catch your name yet," he said.

It had been only minutes since we first

met, but Ace already seemed totally comfortable around me. I hated it. I've always had a great dislike for telling people my name, or having them ask me like they were entitled to it.

"I've got no name to tell the likes of you," I murmured.

I wasn't going to tell him my real name, certainly not on our first

meeting, when I couldn't trust him yet. The day that I decided to make it on my own, I abandoned my old name.

"How come? We're friends already," said Ace. When did we become friends? "C'mon, you can at least tell me your name."

"Pipe down. You want a name for me? I can give you a pen name," I said, deciding

I'd have to play it tough if Ace was going to be so pushy.

"A pen name?"

"Ace is a good name to have. I might even use that when it comes time for me to write a chronicle of my adventures."

I didn't really mean to say that. Suddenly I felt odd.

While it came up in the flow of conversation,

what was it about this place, and these circumstances, that caused me to mention my childhood dream just then?

Ace's expression clouded at the thought of me using his moniker.

"Hold on, now. That's *my* name."

"And I told you, it's a pen name. I can choose to call myself whatever I want."

“Don’t. I aim to achieve greatness with this name. I don’t need you copying me.”

Greatness , He’d said. That told me something about what kind of man this Ace was — as well as the reason he’d washed up on this island.

“Did you find any treasure?” I asked, ignoring the previous topic.

Ace took the bait. “Why, you know something?”

“Nah… Just the rumors…“

“Great treasure always comes to powerful pirates. That's what I always believed. And what happened? I lost my ship, and there’s no treasure. No bounties to collect, *and* I can’t leave. This island is the pits,” he said.

From the way he spoke, it sounded as though he hoped to make a name for himself by finding some legendary treasure, or taking out an infamous pirate, or the like. To think that he wound up stranded on this island due to nothing more than garden-variety hubris…

There had long been a tale about this island

possessing treasure, perhaps because of its natural beauty. It was a famous story among sailors in the area. But none of them dared approach the island. Of course they didn't; the moment they landed, they were doomed to stay. Even if there *was* treasure to be found.

Besides, rumor of treasure was common fodder for sailors. It

wasn’t like they knew anything about the island. They just pointed at a picturesque island in the distance and made up whatever story they felt like telling.

Wherever he picked up the story, Ace clearly took it seriously and made his way here intentionally. So he was the type of person whose ambition was his downfall. The thought of

working with him to survive seemed even less plausible now.

"I know! You can be Deuce!" Ace blurted out. "For your pen name, right? Deuce. It matches with Ace, y'know?"

"Huh? What d'you mean, 'Deuce'?"

Deuce. As in a two of cards or dice? It also means bad luck. Well, that certainly fit my current situation. I had

to admit, it was a clever name... However, just to be sure, I checked with Ace.

"Do you know what Deuce means?"

"Nope. It just sounds similar, doesn't it?" he said simply.

I had to assume he really didn't know. With a serious expression on his face, Ace continued, "Sadly, Ace is my name. I can't give it to ya. So I

think you should use Deuce for your pen name. And it sounds similar, anyway."

"Shut up about 'sounding similar', already!"

"Look, you didn't give me any other name to call you by. And besides, let's say you decide to go by Ace. If we've got two Aces on the island, we're going to get confused about which is

which. Just think about it! If we're alone, and I'm supposed to be Ace, and I'm calling you Ace, then who am I supposed to be?!"

"Um... You're still... Ace. Besides, I was only talking about the pen name I'm going to use eventually. Later on down the line. I wasn't claiming I was going to start calling myself Ace *today* ..."

“Well, my point is, that isn’t convenient for when I want to talk to you. So I’m going to call you Deuce! Got that?” he asked. I didn’t like it, but he was a free man. I wasn’t planning on hanging around him, anyway.

“So, Deuce, now that that’s out of the way, there’s something that’s been on my mind,” Ace continued, leaning

forward to stare me in the face. “Does everyone where you come from wear that sort of thing? Or is it for some kind of festival?”

He was referring to the mask that covered my face — my eyes, specifically.

“Oops! Or is it something I’m not supposed to mention?” he added with concern. Ever since his

introduction, there'd been something oddly formal and polite about his manner. But he didn't need to worry. When I went to sea and abandoned my name, I also chose to hide my face.

"No, I just wear it because I want to."

"Okay, then I'll call you Masked Deuce. The coat seems to suit the name, too. Yeah, I kinda

like that," Ace muttered, satisfied with himself.

"Don't you dare call me that weirdo name!" I snapped. I couldn't let him throw me off my game. This strange Ace fellow had a way about him that was different from other people.

And the whole point of the mask was so that oddballs like him wouldn't be able to learn my identity. It's much

easier to stay out of unnecessary trouble if people can't recognize your face.

"Listen, I've been wearing this mask from the moment I headed out to sea," I explained. "Even if the Navy happens to develop an interest in me, they won't be able to identify me this way, see? It's common sense, get it?"

It was a symbolic act,

in a way — a sign of my personal determination. When I chose to live on my own at sea, I left my real name and face behind on land. Then I finally felt like I was *alive* for once. The failing medical student was no more. I had no regrets about my choice. There was no place for me on dry land.

My father was a great doctor, and my older

brother became a great doctor, too. I stood out in my family for being the only one who was *not* great.

The one thing my father said to me whenever we met was, "Don't embarrass me." It was such a constant refrain that I hardly ever heard him say anything else.

I was continually compared to my great

brother. For all intents and purposes, he acted as though I didn't exist. He avoided and ignored me whenever he could.

My friends teased me about whether the two of us were actually related. My brother probably avoided me because it made him angry to be the subject of their mocking.

And my friends generally avoided me

too, not wanting to be thought stupid if they were associated with me in any way. They only came by when they felt like telling jokes at my expense. In fact, I realize now that they probably weren't my friends. I was the only one who thought they were.

There was no place for me back there. Nothing changed, whether I was present or

absent. In short, I was completely insignificant. It's not such an uncommon situation.

But while this might be just the same boring old story, the kind that could take place in any world, real or made-up, that didn't change the fact that I was the protagonist of the boring old story. If that's what I had to work with, then it was up to me to live

true to my feelings and be what I wanted to be.

Life back home was a repetition of the same old thing, every single day. Over time, I began to feel this foolish sense, faint at first but growing stronger by the day, that I wasn't actually the real me. But I wanted to be the true me. I wanted to live my true life. And as I grappled with the emptiness of my life, I

just so happened to come across *Brag Men* .

When I read it, the brilliant vividness of the sea came alive for me. It was as shocking as if I had learned that my life had no color, that the real color was over the sea.

In that moment, I realized that I *was* my real self. That this life was the one that counted, the only one I

had. And once that was clear, I knew I had to go all-out.

I had to live my life to its fullest, and keep moving onward like death itself was at my heels. If I fell, I would swim through sewer water to get back on my feet again. And the thing I needed to make all of this work was the mask.

I needed the mask to be myself.

“I dunno if I’d call that logical. I think a man ought to be bold, show his face and be known for it, y’know? I can’t imagine doing it any other way,” Ace said.

I came back to my senses after my reverie about the past. It felt like so long ago that I’d left my hometown.

“I don’t want to be a bountied man,” I explained. “I just want

adventure. That's all."

"But still, you don't have to go out of your way to hide your name and face, do you?"

"You wouldn't understand. Where I come from, people were mocked for choosing the freedom of the sea. They treated pirates and criminals and adventurers all the same. If people discovered my family

was related to a dropout, they'd throw stones at them in place of me."

"Ah, I get it... Aha!" he said, his face lit up with understanding. "You love your family, don'tcha?"

"Huh?"

"You left your family and hometown behind, and you don't want to cause them any trouble, right?" Ace guessed.

"Of course I don't

love them!” I burst out. “I don’t love them at all. I hate them! That’s why I’m here!”

“Really? That’s weird. That wasn’t the hunch I had,” Ace said, frowning and running his hand through his shining black hair. “That can’t be true...“

In a sense, he was right. It *shouldn’t* be that way. But I couldn't think of any other way

to explain it.

"Speaking of family, I've got a little brother. Not related by blood, though," Ace went on, looking toward the sea. "Real loud and wild, like a monkey. I didn't think about it much when we were around each other, but now that I'm all alone, I'm surprised by how much I miss him."

He chuckled to himself. So Ace's family

was one brother he wasn't even related to by blood. And when he thought about him, he smiled.

I felt half-envious and half-annoyed with Ace. This far away from the place where I was born and raised, and I didn't miss it even a little bit.

The two of us seemed to be about the same age. How did we turn out to be so different?

“ I feel ashamed to be related to you. ”

That was the only thing my brother, who usually ignored me, actually said to my face. The words replayed in my mind, as clear as when it happened, and I clenched my fists.

“Well, good for you. You’ve got a home to go back to,” I found myself saying, although it was more the start of a

sulking monologue to myself. “Why’d you even come here, then? Just go back to your brother...“

“H-hey, what’s wrong, man?”

“I’m not like you! You should be happy that you’ve got somewhere to call home!” I shot to my feet, though they were unsteady. “You’ve got a home, and a brother who’s not a blood relative but who’s family

in your heart. You're a damn lucky guy, you know that? Do you? And I bet your precious mom and dad are worried sick about you right now. You're the luckiest jerk in the world!"

My anger was truly satisfying. I turned to walk away from him.

But then Ace murmured, "My mom's gone."

It was a quiet,

subdued voice, not at all the same tone he'd been speaking in until now. I couldn't help but stop. I knew that I was the one being a jerk, but I still couldn't keep myself from spinning around and saying, "And your dad? What about your dad, huh?"

Ace's eyes wandered as he replied, "Don't have a dad, either…"

It had been a bad

idea. Now things were very awkward. But since it was already ugly, I pushed ahead and made more excuses for myself.

"When I see my dad, all he says is, 'Don't embarrass me.' I'm sure whatever your family situation was, it was better than that. Who cares if he's gone? At least you have some happy memories to comfort you."

I faltered there for some reason. Ace was staring at me. He seemed hesitant to speak up, and when he did, he said, “I don’t have any happy memories. I don’t even know what my mother’s face looked like. And my father was a no-good man. Basically, he was a criminal.”

“A criminal? So he’s dead already. It’s not

like you're responsible for his crimes. Why do you look so gloomy? That's a minor problem!"

Silence. Ace's expression did not lighten at all.

I cajoled him. "He probably wasn't even such a bad guy, I bet! You're just dwelling on the situation! Nobody remembers a garden-variety criminal. In fact,

I doubt anyone thinks much about you at all! Not that committing crimes is acceptable — if your dad was the King of the Pirates, I'd understand why you'd worry, y'know? Because that guy's the *worst* . I mean, I'd want to kill myself if that were the case. But your situation isn't that bad, right? Eh? So stop acting like you're the protagonist of

some trage…dy …“

I trailed off. Ace was staring down at the dunes. His lips were pursed tightly shut.

“I mean… Hang on… Why are you making that face?”

Something was wrong. It felt weird. I tried an awkward smile, but it had no effect.

“You’re… you’re joking, right?”

Ace closed his eyes.

His head shook side to side, barely perceptible.

"R-Roger…? The *Roger* …? The King of the Pirates?"

Without saying a word, Ace nodded.

The sun was on its way down by now, and the far end of the sky was turning red. Ace was silent. Even the seabirds,with their obnoxious calls, had gone quiet at some

point. I was keenly aware of the solitary sound of the waves. I didn't know the island could be so quiet.

I stared at him, directly in the face.

King of the Pirates, Gold Roger.

He wasn't some "garden-variety criminal." He was a legendary outlaw, whose name was familiar to every single person in

the world.

He was the pirate who conquered the Grand Line, and got his hands on the legendary treasure, the One Piece.

In fact, his public execution essentially changed the world overnight.

There was the time before Roger, and the time after Roger: that was how huge his influence was on the rest

of society. The common people were terrified of him, the Navy and the World Government were wary, and those who didn't fit into either category considered him a god. That was the kind of man Roger was.

To be perfectly honest, I thought of him almost as a legendary monster from a storybook. And now that monster's son, his flesh

and blood, was standing right before me?

It was impossible to take seriously. If it weren't for the fact that we were stranded together on a deserted island without any water or food, I would have laughed in his face. But now...

The extreme hunger and thirst in a circumstance like this brings out a human

being's true nature. You do and say things you wouldn't normally do and say— which is why I had acted the way I did.

Neither Ace nor I could lie in this situation. We weren't really in a state to exchange tall tales.

Ace still wasn't saying anything. What could be running through his head at that moment?

It could have been regret; wishing that he hadn't let slip the secret of his background. But it was the truth, straight from his deepest self, brought to the surface by the reality of our predicament.

"Dammit..."

I clicked my tongue and turned my back on Ace again.

"Ah, h-hey, wanna build a boat with—" he

said.

“Don’t talk to me again. I had no interest in helping you from the start…“

I told him I didn’t need any friends, and walked away across the sand.

The scene I left behind felt very awkward, indeed.

Even before any thoughts of escape preparation, water and

food were the primary concern. What would be the point of making it off the island only to starve and wither away at sea?

I left Ace behind to make his boat and walked around the island in search of water and food. Unfortunately, the only thing I could actually find to eat was bird eggs— totally incapable of removing

my nagging hunger. I found myself entertaining a preposterous notion that the seabirds flying overhead might die suddenly and fall to the ground right next to me.

There was a forest on the island, but I couldn't find any plants or animals that seemed suitable for eating. I heard the cry of some creature that wasn't a

bird, but I couldn't find it. Digging in the dirt, I found an object that looked like a potato of some kind, but it seemed to be toxic, as biting into it made my tongue numb and my lips swollen.

The forest also had ants. They were vicious, which I discovered when I got too close to their nest. They swarmed over me, getting under my

clothes and biting my skin. Out of sheer anger and frustration, I even brushed a couple from my palm into my mouth. They were sour, and did nothing to alleviate my hunger.

All I could think about was food.

And for some reason, I didn't even think about my favorite dishes; just normal, unremarkable food items, things I

never considered for a moment when my life was comfortable. My head was filled with visions of utterly boring meals.

I even thought about the food I left on my plate when I was full, and of everything I secretly pushed off to the side as a child, just because I didn't like it. If only I had those scraps here, now...

The first thing I do when I get off this island is eat this. *And then I'll eat* that. *And this will be next. After that, I'll be in the mood for this. Oh, how I wish I could eat that again…*

It was all I thought about for an entire day. It felt like I was possessed by the spirit of hunger.

The water situation, at least, was a bit better

— but only a bit. There was a small rock face a bit up from the beach. I noticed the rocks there were damp.

At first I thought it was just seawater, but when I licked it, there was no salt. Either it was rainwater or a natural spring. Whatever the origin, there was fresh water dripping down the rocks.

I stuck an empty

bottle against the rock and collected the water using a scrap of my clothing, twisting it into a little rope, tying it to the rock, and sticking the other end into the bottle. The water then made its way along the rope and was deposited, drop by drop, into the container.

An entire day of water collection yielded only two or three

mouthfuls, but it did help diminish my thirst.

I lost track of the date very quickly.

Back home, I had naively imagined that if I ever wound up shipwrecked on an island, I would mark the days by drawing lines on a wall, the way they always did in the adventure books.

In reality, however, I couldn’t even be

bothered. I was too busy just trying to survive.

An entire day could be taken up just wandering around, trying to gather water and food. And all that movement only made my throat drier and my stomach emptier. Just sitting still made that happen too, of course.

I also had to protect myself against the chill of the night and the

gusts of wind coming from the sea. As I searched for food, I collected branches and leaves and built myself a shelter. Along the way, I gathered materials that could be used to build a boat and escape the island.

There was just too much to do.

The sun was up before I knew it, and sank just as quickly. For

some reason, the night felt so much longer.

I went into my shelter and curled my exhausted body into a ball, only to be awakened by the sound of the sea breezes, which blew harder at night. It seemed like they came just to wake me up every time I felt sleep creeping closer. All night long the process repeated, until I began to feel like someone was

intentionally making the wind blow to keep me from sleeping.

And each time I bolted awake again, I muttered, “So cold…“ out of habit. I didn’t even have to think for the words to come to my lips. And though I tried day after day, I never succeeded in getting a fire going. Either I was doing it wrong, or the trees on the island

weren’t the right kind for fires, or both. I had to endure many fireless nights.

The beach was cold after dark. But in the forest, where the starlight was dim, the fierce ants were enough to keep me from sleeping soundly. So I curled up in my long coat and muttered, “So cold…“ to myself. It became such an

unconscious habit that at times I startled myself awake with the sound of my own voice.

It was ironic, really. Here I was, on a beautiful uninhabited island, just like in the stories I'd daydreamed about as a boy. And now I was on the verge of death.

Dreams and reality couldn't be more different...

Just as my attempts at survival were less than successful, Ace's shipbuilding quest wasn't going any better.

I was walking along the beach one afternoon when I came across Ace in the midst of an attempt to escape by sea. I wondered how many times he'd tried by now.

Ace had created not a boat, but what I would

sooner describe as a coffin — if the intent were to insult the dead rather than honor them. He cut a dashing figure as he rode it out into the water.

After a few moments, the entire vessel was sucked under the surface and did not reemerge. Soon after that, a soaking wet, boatless Ace returned to shore.

“I can’t stop now. I

gotta get off this island!” Ace muttered to himself as he plodded away. He seemed desperate and despondent now, a far cry from the cheerful fellow I had met on the sand.

I plodded away myself, in the opposite direction. I still needed to acquire the water and food that would allow me to survive the day.

My stomach growled.

Without awareness, my face and body had grown considerably withered and gaunt from the ordeal. But just then, something occurred to me: Ace certainly looked despondent, but he didn't seem quite *skeletal* just now.

I spun around. Ace was already out of sight. I decided to trace his steps in the sand.

I had been working so

hard to keep myself alive, but I had no idea what Ace was doing, other than trying to build his boat.

My legs felt heavy. They were so exhausted I could barely walk. I stumbled along, half-dazed, until at last I saw Ace up ahead. I hid behind a nearby tree to watch him.

The next moment, I nearly gasped and gave

away my presence.

Ace stood facing the beach with his back to me. And to my shock — for I had no idea where he'd found it — he held a big, round fruit in his hand.

Even from a distance, I could see that it was boldly colored and ripe. I grunted, "Where did he find that? So he's just been eating fruit this whole time?!"

Saliva was flooding my mouth. My empty stomach growled, commanding me to ease its hunger. My eyes could not move from the fruit in Ace's hand.

Then a memory of the day we first met passed through my mind.

Ace nodded when I asked if his father was the King of the Pirates. Through his silence, he admitted that he was the

son of a dastardly pirate. The descendent of a man executed for his reign of terror. Ace was the relic of a man judged guilty of the greatest of crimes. And he was alive now, suffering from neither hunger nor thirst. Should that happen? Was that right?

Already my mind was formulating a plan to steal the fruit from Ace, one way or another.

I clutched a thick branch nearby. In a haze, my brain worked in search of a reason, a rationale. Wasn't it all Roger's fault that both pirates and adventurers were treated the same back where I grew up, and mocked as if there was no difference? I wasn't sure, but it had to be true. I needed it to be true.

It's a deserted island.

No one around other than the two of us. No use for sympathy. No need to feel guilty. If anyone deserves it, it's Ace, son of the infamously evil Gold Roger...!

I crept to Ace, my feet unsteady, holding the heavy stick.

At last I was within range. I lifted my arm to strike... and my stomach gurgled.

“ *Ouhh* ,” I moaned. He spun around and saw me.

“Huh? Oh, hey, nice stick, man!”

Ace grabbed the stick. That was all it took for me to let go and fall on my butt. Forget about stealing the fruit, I couldn’t even stand on my own two feet.

There he stood, looming over me with the stick in his hand. All

I could do was stare up at him, my face pale, my breathing hard. My weapon was gone. I didn't have the willpower to run away. He was going to attack *me* instead, I knew it.

But Ace did not react the way I expected him to.

"You came to help me build a boat, yeah?" he said, grinning.

"Ah... uh... aaah..." I

moaned, incapable of forming words. I felt deeply, astonishingly ashamed of myself. Tears sprang into my dried-out eyes. Thank goodness I had the mask on to hide them.

And just then, despite the situation — or perhaps because of it — my stomach growled again mightily.

Ace just smirked and held out the fruit in his

hand.

"Here, eat up."

Gurrrrgle .

Ace said, "Whoops!" As it happened, his stomach had answered mine with a growl of its own. Apparently he was just as hungry as I was. And yet he offered me the fruit willingly.

"Y-you've got a stockpile of them, don't you? Where are they? Tell me!" I demanded.

“Nope, I just found this one. Think it might’ve washed up on shore, just like we did.”

I felt a shock as hard as if a blunt object had struck my skull. When people speak of a shame so great it prevents them from looking upon the person they have wronged, this is what they mean. My head hung, and I realized that I was crying. I had to

stifle my sobs to keep Ace from hearing them.

What a terrible thing I'd been considering.

Simply for having the blood of Roger in his veins, I had assumed that Ace must be a bad person. I told myself that anything I did to him was justified because of that. But all I knew about Roger came from the papers and books. I'd never met him or spoken

with him. I just accepted whatever society and other people said about him, and assumed it was all true.

What a shallow, ugly way of thinking.

I had a sudden realization: this was the exact way of thinking I saw in adults when I was a child. It was something I despised back then.

The adults made fun

of *Brag Men* , and were biased against it.

I, too, was biased against Ace.

Since when had I become one of those nasty, cynical adults, always jumping to conclusions.

What was the real Ace like? He was the kind of person who shared his only food with a starving man, when he himself was

already starving. That's the kind of guy Ace was. *That* was the man who inherited the blood of Roger, King of the Pirates, as I had personally experienced him.

"What's up? Aren't you hungry? Eat up," he said.

I sniffled and said, "I can't..."

I was ashamed of myself. I wasn't worthy

of accepting food from Ace. I wasn't worth it. I deserved to starve to and suffer; that was the only way I'd make up for what I'd almost done.

"Eat it," he said, slightly miffed, and shoved the fruit at me.

"I can't!" I said stubbornly, shaking my head.

"Why not?! I know you're hungry. Don't

hold back."

"I can't, because you're hungry too." I protested, my voice rising. He could probably tell I was crying by now. Ace looked a bit worried, and fell silent for a moment.

"Then let's split it. How does that sound?" he suggested.

Before I could give him an answer, he had

pulled out his knife and cut the fruit into two pieces. “Here, I’ll eat too. But you need some fruit, man.”

He handed me one of the halves with a smile. With an offer like that, and the fruit right in front of me, I gave up refusing and took it gratefully.

Ace took a bite of his half of the fruit. “Mmm, not poisonous… Not

very tasty, either," he said, his mouth full.

I took a bite of the fruit, too. It was impossible to resist — juice oozing out, so fresh and moist.

"It's so good... It's so bad, but... it's so good!"

Once I'd taken one bite, I couldn't stop. I devoured the fruit, barely conscious of what I was doing. Without my realizing it, huge tears

ran down my cheeks as I ate.

"It's so good... It's so good... Thank you, thank you..." I sobbed.

The truth was, you couldn't even generously call the fruit tasty. I had never eaten such disgusting fruit before. And yet, in all my life, nothing had ever tasted as good as that fruit did in that moment.

Here on this desolate

island where I was stranded, battling against hunger and thirst, I had at last come to experience what life truly tasted like.

Gradually the sky turned darker and darker red. Another day was coming to an end. Ace and I finished eating our fruit, complaining about the taste all the while, and sat next to one another, watching

the sun set over the horizon. As usual, the island was breathtakingly beautiful. I recalled the skeleton I found earlier near the bushes at the edge of the sand — when he washed up here alone, did he also gaze out at the sunset this way?

All alone. No one to talk to.

With that in mind, how lucky was I that at

least Ace was here with me? It had taken me all this time to realize that I wasn't alone. Thanks to Ace, I could survive on my own. It was knowing that someone else was on the island with me that led me to choose solitude, to make it on my own.

Ace seemed to be thinking about it the same way.

"Look at the sun," he

said abruptly. “If I think ‘Man, that’s gorgeous,’ but it’s just me all alone, then what does it matter? If nobody else is seeing it with me, what’s the point of it all?”

He chuckled to himself. The sun would be going down in minutes, but it didn’t feel as cold as it usually did at this time of day. Must have been because I finally had some food

in my stomach. Or maybe it was having Ace sitting nearby.

It was a mysterious feeling. In fact, it almost felt warmer than it was earlier in the day.

I turned to look at Ace.

He was burning.

Not emotionally. He was actually burning. He was *literally* on fire — flames were shooting from his skin.

“Yeow, it’s hot! What’s going on?!” I screamed, just as Ace also realized something was amiss.

“Whoa! W-what is *this* ?!”

Ace yelled and panicked on the spot. I picked up some sand with my hands, and hurled it at Ace, but it had no effect on the flames on his skin. If anything, they seemed

to get hotter.

"W-why did you suddenly catch on fire?!" I yelled, as I continued shoveling sand onto him. But something about it struck me as odd.

Ace's body had caught fire, but it didn't seem to be actually burning his clothes or skin. Strangely enough, it was as though his entire body — and

everything he wore on it — had actually *become* fire…

“ *Aaaaah* ! It’s hot! It’s hot!! It’s… not hot?”

Ace instantly regained his cool. And in a matter of moments, the flames covering his body became noticeably smaller and finally vanished. There wasn’t a single burn on his skin, and no damage to his

clothes or hat. Not even a speck of soot.

"Do... do you think that fruit," I murmured in a stunned daze, "could have been a Devil Fruit?"

The forbidden fruit. An incarnation of the devil of the sea.

Whether true or false, the legend was that if you took a single bite, such a fruit would impart demonic powers.

In exchange, the person who ate the fruit brought upon themselves the wrath of the sea. They would never be able to swim again.

Without realizing it, we'd been eating one of those legendary fruits which I'd never before seen outside of a book, and which would probably go for a minimum of a hundred

million berries at auction. That had to be the answer — I couldn't imagine any other explanation.

"That was a Devil Fruit?" said Ace, staring at his palm in wonder. "Wait a second. Does that mean I can't swim anymore?!"

He leapt to his feet and promptly rushed toward the water, not hesitating a bit as he

pushed out into the waves.

"Hey, check it out, Deuce. I'm just fine. It's not a Devil Fruit!"

He walked further into the sea.

"It wasn't a Devil Fruit. I'm just fine. I'm just... *fahhh* ..."

Suddenly, Ace crumpled like a puppet with no hand controlling it.

"What are you

doing?!” I shouted, rushing toward the sinking man. I grabbed him and dragged him desperately back to the shore. When it was done, something occurred to me.

“Hang on… Why am *I* okay?”

I looked over my own body, the way Ace had done with his. There were no sudden bursts of flame on my skin, and I

was perfectly fine in the water.

"A Devil Fruit only bestows its power to the first person to take a bite," Ace said, sitting upright, his strength apparently regained. It was hard to believe he'd been totally weakened a second ago. "The rest of it is just a nasty-tasting fruit."

He stared at his fingertips. The light

seemed to waver around them, and suddenly a small fire rose from the ends.

There was no doubt now that it was a real Devil Fruit.

“So this is a Devil Fruit… It doesn’t quite feel real.” Ace murmured, staring at his fingers again. The reddish flicker of fire calmed, and when it was gone only pristine

fingertips remained.

"Hmm. Interesting," he muttered, taking it all in stride.

I asked him, "Do you know a lot about Devil Fruits?"

"I told you I have a brother, right? His name's Luffy. He's got Devil Fruit powers too. So in a way, I'm used to it. Though I used to win every single fight we had."

“You sound like wild brothers. How is it possible that a regular person could beat someone with such powers?”

It was all so new to me; my mind was having trouble keeping up with the details.

“My brother’s a rubber man with the power of the Gum-Gum Fruit. It’s pretty funny. His arms stretch out like

beeyoiiing ,” Ace said happily, sticking out his fist and mimicking his arm extending outward.

Ace was generally cheerful and outgoing all the time, but he was especially excited when talking about his little brother. He truly seemed to care a great deal about him, despite not being related by blood — or perhaps because of it. Even stranded here at

the end of the world, on this empty island, he didn't lose his love for his family.

"While I kinda like the idea of being in the same situation as Luffy with the fruit," he continued, his face darkening a bit, "this is a terrible problem to have on a deserted island. Now I can't swim. The next time my boat sinks, I'm done for.

I can’t escape now.”

Ace stared at his hand. This time his entire palm lit up with flames, not just the fingertips. The sun was beyond the horizon now, and the fire brought light to the darkening beach. It was almost like a campfire. Our shadows flickered, shifting like the sound of the waves.

He stared at the fire in silence. His worries

were entirely justified.

If you ate a Devil Fruit, the sea despised you, and robbed you of the ability to swim. And it wasn't *just* being unable to swim, as was true of many people. Simply being in the water made you completely weak and helpless. This was now Ace's reality.

I didn't need to think too hard to understand

the implications.

Unique sea currents surrounded the entire island. It was an enormous, aquatic version of an antlion trap. Ace had built a number of boats while trying to escape. Even if he got tossed from the boats, he could still swim and cling to them. When they broke, he swam back to shore. These endeavors would

no longer be possible.

If he fell overboard, only death awaited.

That was the price he paid for this power of flame that he hadn't even asked for. It could bring light to the darkness, but it couldn't take him across the sea.

Ace's ability wasn't just that he could make fire come off of his skin — it actually turned his entire being into fire.

Accordingly, the name of what he ate was the Flame-Flame Fruit. Fire was supposed to be the tool that allowed man to conquer nature, but in Ace's case, it was merely trapping him here.

A body turned to fire — flames that leapt off his physical self. One of the most powerful forms of energy found in nature. And it was at Ace's beck and call now.

I had a sudden flash of inspiration.

"Ace! You can control that, right?"

"Hmm? Well, I might need a bit of practice at first, but it seems to be pretty easy."

He made the shape of a gun with his hand and shot a small ball of fire from his index finger toward the sea. It curved up, then down, and vanished into the dark of

the night.

"Well, what if you *just* used the force of expelling the flame? Like, by regulating its output, or something. Can you consciously control it to that extent?"

"I dunno, but I feel like... it could be possible," Ace said.

I grinned back at him. "Then maybe we *can* get off this island."

The next day, Ace's training began.

Enveloping objects in flame and burning them up. Using the force of the fire to push things away. We practiced over and over; I jammed sticks and branches into the sand to serve as targets.

Thanks to Ace, we could easily make fires now, so the process of survival was much

easier. In fact, he knew a lot about the jungle too, and he said he grew up in one.

We dug holes until we found natural water, filtered it, and boiled it for a supply of drinking water.

Things that hadn't been quite edible suddenly became much more so after they were cooked over a fire. And we didn't have to suffer

the chill of the night.

A few days passed in this way. Ace could control his fire at will at this point. And, at last…

"It's done!"

We finally finished building a ship. Our hands and clothes were filthy black now, as once Ace had trained himself properly, we burned all the wood we were using to make the ship. Charring and

carbonizing the surface of the wood made it more durable and resistant to fire and water — much better than using untreated wood, according to a sailor's journal I once read. How effective this was, I didn't know, but surely it could withstand the waves and salt breeze better than untreated wood. Our vessel was only possible

because Ace could instantly create fire, and direct it to do exactly what he wanted.

Also, this ship had a method of propulsion — the exact thing we needed to escape the current trap around the island and get out to the open sea. The two of us together weren't strong enough to do such a thing, but I had the idea to use the power of Ace's

flames.

"Listen, we need the force of the flames — their energy — to spin this board. That's going to push the boat forward. I've decided to call this baby the *Striker* ."

" *Striker* , huh? And this will get us past the currents? In that case, let's celebrate before we go! Let's use up all the food we've got and have

a party!”

“Don’t eat that; it’s our food for the journey.”

“Oh, right.”

Nearby was all the food and water we could scrounge up to bring on the boat. I picked up two bottles of water we’d collected and gave one to Ace. “But we can celebrate with these for today.”

“Sounds good.”

Ace smiled, showing his white teeth. We shared a toast with bottled water.

The boat slid across the gentle waves. The power of Ace's flames was our propulsion, pushing us onward. It was faster than paddling with our hands, and more reliable than waiting for the wind.

The island grew smaller behind us.

The calls of the birds became quieter, too. The grave we built in which to lay that skeleton to rest was as small as a speck of dust. From a distance, the island really did look like a beautiful little paradise. The sky was clear, and the sea sparkled in the sun.

Strangely enough, despite the horrible battle I'd fought with

hunger and thirst there, I almost began to feel wistful about the experience. How could I have guessed that I'd feel nostalgic about an inescapable death trap? I never felt that way about home once I left...

Ace also looked back at the island growing smaller in the distance and said quietly, "At first, I thought I needed to find

some treasure quick, and fight and fight and fight the tough pirates to make a name for myself…“

He kept one hand on his brilliant orange hat to keep it from flying away in the ocean breeze.

“But I was wrong about that. You can’t make a name for yourself that way. No matter how valuable the

treasure you find, or the number of battles you win against worthy opponents, none of it means anything if you're all alone."

"So I guess the rumor that there was treasure on that island was just a tall tale after all."

Ace looked over to me and grinned confidently. "I dunno about that," he said,

extending his hand toward me. “ *You’re* coming with me… aren’t you?”

I answered him with the same grin. “I have a feeling I’ll be able to write a good adventure chronicle if I spend some time with you.”

We shared a firm handshake.

As I squeezed his hand, I considered the

idea of dedicating the rest of my life to his cause.

I suppose that the feeling of wistfulness I had about the island was a good sign that I was probably meant to end my life there. In fact, that's certainly what would have happened, if not for Ace's presence.

But life decided on a different path for me.

Through sheer

coincidence I met Ace in a place where I shouldn't have found anyone at all. That meeting saved my life. It seemed to me like this was fate.

I'll live my life until the end for him, then. A life with no regrets. I've gotta be the luckiest man in the world if that's the feeling he inspires in me .

As we proceeded farther out to sea, the

waves began getting higher. The currents roiled and jolted, trying to toss our ship, and the wood itself shook with the waves' impact. But the ship held, and continued steadfast on its way.

"We might come from different circumstances, but we've both got some conflicted feelings about our fathers," Ace said

suddenly, looking straight ahead. “So let’s get over it… Over the waves, past the storm, beyond our fate. And away from our fathers, while we’re at it!”

His flames roared higher than usual at the moment.

The ship picked up with speed and began to vibrate. I clung to the craft like my life depended on it. The

little boat moved straight and true, parting the waves and penetrating the currents. The prow lifted upward. For a moment, the boat soared in the air over the island's deadly current trap. Salt spray danced around it, glittering with the light of the sun.

Despite clinging for dear life to the craft, I looked up at Ace. He

was smiling. He stood proudly facing the waves, beaming with childlike innocence.

Then he put his wildest ambitions into words.

"I'm going to be *greater* than the King of the Pirates!"

The sky was clear. Our course was set for the Grand Line. I gazed out upon the sea before us, a stretch of water I

could never have conquered on my own. This was the birth cry of the two-man Spade Pirates crew.

Chapter Two

What quality makes one a captain?

I think it is being loved by others.

A captain is like the sun, shining bright to illuminate dark waters.

You can always

spot the captain in the center of a crowd, a person who instinctively brings together people from different homes and upbringings and personalities and ways of thinking. No one who is not loved and cherished by others in this way can be a captain.

And Ace was meant to be a captain.

He had something

that attracted people to him. Something special that went beyond simple concepts like charisma and heroism. It was this instant respect and fondness for Ace that prompted people to join the Spade Pirates.

Pirates are outlaws almost by definition, and the people who wound up in the Spade Pirates were outlaws among outlaws - those who had

no place in other crews, or people with odd backgrounds who never would have become pirates otherwise. He even seemed to have a strange power of fate about him, effortlessly compelling such people across our path as we traveled, without having to seek them out.

So, as we traveled the Grand Line our comrades grew by ones

and twos around Ace, and our ship grew bigger as well.

Then, one day...

“Gaaa ha ha ha! Ace! I love you, man!”

A sweaty, bearded man swung a cutlass around on the deck.

“Shut your disgusting mouth!” I said, kicking him smack in the face. He flew straight off the ship.

“M-my bountyyy!”

the man wailed as he plummeted into the sea. That was not one of the outlaws who came to Ace out of respect. He was the kind of outlaw who came for hostile reasons: an enemy.

Ace was known for being the captain of the Spade Pirates now, and had a sizable bounty on his head. Having a bounty naturally meant unwanted interest from

people you encounter, and a group of them was attacking the ship on this day.

Sidled up next to our ship was the vessel belonging to the bounty hunters. They jumped over to our deck, roaring and with weapons raised, one after the other. There were many of them - several times our number, easily. Which side were the real

marauders here?

In a blink, the Spade Pirates' deck became a battlefield.

The marauders' target was Ace, and he was instantly surrounded by bounty hunters and hidden from view. I got pushed off to the side of the deck, where many of our crewmates were isolated and outnumbered.

It had all started

when they'd claimed their ship was breaking down and they needed help. So we'd approached, none the wiser. It seems this group of bounty hunters often employed such a method to attack passing pirate ships.

It worked because everyone who lived on the water knew the terror of being stranded in the middle of the

open sea. Under typical circumstances, no one would pass by a ship in that state without doing anything. It was practically unthinkable.

Even the wickedest pirate would stop their ship - if not to show mercy, then at least to put the poor souls out of their misery and seize their booty. So no matter what kind of pirate you were dealing

with, they were going to stop and have a look. These bounty hunters had banded together to take advantage of that habit.

But doesn't taking advantage of the kindness of others, especially those showing mercy to fellow sailors, make such people even more wicked than pirates?

"These bastards don't

have any sense of common courtesy," I snarled, just before I noticed a burning sensation on my right cheek. "Whoa!!"

I spun around, and a bright red flame shot past me. The foes nearby were blasted off their feet, screaming piteously. Ace had swung a fist to hurl fire at them.

"Hey, be careful, Ace!

You’re gonna burn my coat!” I yelled at him.

“Sorry! But I ain’t gonna throw off any fire that burns my crew!” he shouted back from a distance. Flickering flames surrounded his right arm, and he smiled. True to his declaration, none of our guys or the ship were harmed, and he was hitting the invading enemies with perfect

accuracy. Ace had made great progress in his control of the Flame-Flame Fruit's powers. So much so that his signature "Fire Fist" technique was becoming his nickname as well.

Ace raced across the deck, his fire shining along with him. The bounty hunters had no defense against his dancing, shapeshifting flames. And in the

familiar confines of our own ship, Ace might as well have been in his own backyard. No one could stop him.

But while I was distracted by his combat display, a gunshot rang out.

I spun around and saw a bounty hunter right behind me, hunched over and holding his hand.

“Thanks, Teach!” I

said, and kicked the man. His eyes rolled back and he passed out; if I had to guess, he probably wished that he'd been kicked into unconsciousness *before* he got shot. He'd been about to attack me when a sniper's bullet came from nowhere and knocked his weapon out of his hand.

"Just be more careful, Deuce," said a voice

from nowhere, just like the gunshot. The owner of that voice was nowhere to be seen. He was nowhere to be sensed, either.

The man who'd fired the gun was named Mihal.

I and many others on the crew called him "Teach". Because, rare enough men who lived at sea, he was in fact a teacher at one time.

Mihal had a dream of sailing across the seas and providing education to children in remote places where schools did not exist. But this goal of his did not fit well with the ways of more traditional sailors. It was none other than Ace who recognized and supported his dream by giving him space on our ship.

“A man can’t do any

good reading amid all this noise. These raucous guests of ours could use some education. Let's get it over with," said the voice, followed by several gunshots this time.

Elsewhere on the ship, bounty hunters' guns sprang from their grip, diverted by his shots. And yet the man himself was still nowhere to be seen.

Mihal was a bit of a shut-in by nature, so he hardly ever left his cabin. He didn't even come out when we stopped at port to buy supplies, preferring instead to stand watch with a book in his hand. Some people called him "Indoor Mihal".

He looked rather like an intellectual, with his silk hat and pristinely polished glasses, but

Mihal was quite capable in a fight. And his ability to shoot with perfect aim from unknown locations made him the perfect ship's guard.

There was just one problem.

"I can never tell where he's even shooting from!"

It made you wonder if someone like him was really cut out to be a teacher.

“Ooh, that’s a pretty gun you have there,” said a voice in the midst of battle. “Made in the North Blue, I assume? That’s a rare piece. I like the skull symbol.”

The man peered with great interest at the gun that was pointed at none other than himself. He had a very peculiar presentation, with so many skull accessories that it seemed almost as

though he was trying too hard to pass himself off as a pirate.

This man was our crewmate, and wouldn't you guess it, he went by the name of Skull.

"I like your style. You got nothin' *but* style," he said to the bounty hunter pointing the gun in question. The hunter seemed a bit confused by this kind of attention.

“The problem is, this gun went outta production real quick. You wanna know why?” Skull grabbed the gun. “Because when you do this, it jams.”

“Huh? What the…?”

The trigger of the gun clicked to no effect, other than the bounty hunter’s sudden panic. It wasn’t shooting.

“And that’s why I gotta compliment you

on your style, man.”

The bounty hunter’s face went pale, just before Skull’s fist connected with it.

“Heh heh. This really is a rare piece. Gonna hang it up in my cabin,” Skull raved, gazing greedily at the gun left in his hand.

Like Mihal, he wasn’t your typical sailor. Skull considered himself a collector, and

his category of choice was pirate goods. He collected items with skulls - in other words, he wasn't even a pirate himself.

He just loved pirates so much that he would sneak onto any manner of pirate ship, then work as a swabbie until they reached the next port and let him off. Only someone more than a little crazy would

lead a life like that.

Many pirates took one look at Skull and appraised him as nothing more than an eccentric, good for little more than deckhand work, but Ace saw him differently. Ace relied on his vast experience as someone who'd sailed around the world on many different ships. Skull was valuable as a source of information

about the seas.

After meeting Ace, he'd gone from being Skull the collector to Skull the info agent.

For his part, Skull was deeply grateful to Ace for seeing such potential in him, and joined the Spade Pirates vowing to become the world's greatest dealer of information. According to him, however, he was *only*

an info dealer, still not a pirate.

"Your collecting methods really freak me out," I said to Skull, who was rapturously examining his new loot. "Don't forget, we're still in battle."

"Hey Master Deu!" Skull said, looking up. I couldn't actually see his face, because it was hidden behind a skull mask. As an agent of

information, he considered his own features to be part of an inventory of valuable details he could sell. I could relate to that. We had arrived at essentially the same place through different logical paths.

Incidentally, though he considered his face to be premium information that came at a price, no one had ever

paid him for those goods. Given that he was happy to boast about his looks when newcomers joined the crew, I had the feeling that he actually wanted to take the mask off, but had waited too long, and now it would only be awkward.

Skull, Mihal, and I were considered the brain trust of the Spade Pirates. We were the

intellectuals . The crew tended to attract combat types, as personified by Ace. So because of our roles among the crew, I ended up talking to the other two more than anyone else.

"What can I say? It's a rare gun. Besides, the fight's almost over," Skull said, jutting his chin out to indicate the center of the ship deck.

Flame

Commandment - Ace created a swirling vortex of fire around him that left the remaining enemies in shambles.

The next thing I knew, the shouting had stopped. The only sound left was the groaning of the bounty hunters who had boarded our ship.

They didn't last very long for how many of them there were , I thought.

There was a major difference in capabilities between me, dealing with just a few of the hunters in the corner, and the combat team with Ace in the middle of the deck, who swept up all the rest in one go.

"Well, looks like they're all mopped up," Ace noted, glancing around at the fallen bounty hunters. "Listen up! Pick up your buddies

who went down and get off this ship!”

The few who were still able to stand were stunned by the force of his statement. Next to Ace, an enormous feline growled menacingly.

This creature was another member of the crew: Kotatsu. It got its name from Ace.

Kotatsu was a giant lynx. It was a rare subspecies, apparently,

but I didn't know the full details. Ace found it caught in a poacher's trap on an island and freed it, and Kotatsu felt so grateful that it followed him back to the ship.

When we met it, the lynx's personality was subdued and cowardly, but in the course of our travels, it was returning to its natural boldness.

So whether it was Mihal, or Skull, or Kotatsu - or me, of course - the Spade Pirates were full of those who felt like they'd finally found their place in the world after meeting Ace.

Ganryu of the long-arm tribe and Wallace the fish-man also had nowhere else to go. Ace didn't judge people based on their race or

their appearance. He judged them by something more important: their heart, their nature. He probably didn't even realize he was doing it.

For this, Ace was admired not just by many outlaws, but even by those who were too extreme to be outlaws.

As for the outlaws who preferred to set their sights on him

rather than their hearts, they were all rushing to be the first to jump ship as soon as they heard Kotatsu's low, menacing growl. Those who had been knocked down were either picked up by their comrades, or came to and were promptly chased off the ship by the big cat.

"*Grrrr ... meowww*!"

"Why does it sound

so cute?!” screamed the last bounty hunter as he fell into the sea. It was true that despite its appearance, Kotatsu’s normal, non-growling voice was rather high-pitched and tame when it was on the ship. Maybe it was because Ace had the Flame-Flame Fruit, and thus it was always warm around him. In any case, Kotatsu always behaved

itself around the captain.

With the pillagers gone, the ship deck suddenly felt expansive and empty, and Kotatsu plopped down on the planks and began to rub its back against the wood, exposing its belly. It really was just a gigantic house cat.

The bounty hunters' ship beside us pulled away, and it was as quiet as if the recent

melee had never happened. The ship felt lifeless and empty in the absence of all that action.

It was like the aftermath of a festival. Ace must have felt the same way.

“All right, folks, let’s have a partyyyy!” he cried. The crew rolled out barrels of ale and heaping dishes of meats, and suddenly the

formerly plain deck of the ship became much more welcoming. With food and drink in hand, the crew sang and shouted and enjoyed themselves to their hearts' content.

No breeze was blowing, and the sea was calm. But on the Grand Line, there was no need for a weather forecast. It could be pleasant now, and the

very next moment could bring a torrential storm. That's just the kind of sea it is.

"Those guys back there said they loved you," I said to Ace with a mug in one hand.

He leaned back against the railing and smiled. "Yeah because if they take my head, they can sell it for money."

Ace glanced in the direction of the bounty

hunters' ship. I followed his sight line. There was already thick mist over the area, and the enemy ship was entirely hidden. What a fickle sea this was.

"You're so popular."

"But only with people like them. That's no fun," Ace grumbled as he drank. It was rare for him to be grumpy, but he was right: lately

there had been an increase in attacks for Ace's bounty. Considering Ace's career as a pirate, his bounty was notably higher than others of his generation. For a rookie pirate to command a sum so high without having reached the New World - it was no wonder he became a juicy target.

With each bump in the value of his bounty,

the crew cheered for Ace. And when he saw how happy they were, Ace celebrated too. But nobody knew the reason that Ace;s bounty grew so much higher than that of other pirates. Not us, not the people going after Ace, and probably not even the Navy, under certain ranks.

Maybe nobody knew.

Ace was very

tough, to be sure. And he had the power of a Devil Fruit. In the blink of an eye, he had sunk multiple higher-level pirates who commanded more infamy than he. The Navy couldn't catch us, either. Of course they were wary.

But had Ace really done anything to deserve the price they put on his head? What did it mean that he was

assigned a bounty higher than those who had committed truly atrocious deeds?

It was impossible not to sense some hidden scheme, some plot at work behind this. At least, as his longest-running companion at sea, I couldn't help but think that. And I suspected that Ace had a notion too.

Roger ...

I thought of that name every time I saw Ace's wanted poster.

But I guessed that Ace didn't want to admit it had anything to do with him. Although I knew about the shadow that hung over his existence, Ace never mentioned it to me, and so I had no choice but to pretend I hadn't put two and two together.

"Hey! Still, being

loved has gotta be better than being loathed and despised, regardless of *who's* loving you," I suggested, trying to lighten the mood a bit. "Even a sweaty, gross beardo like…"

I came to an abrupt stop. I saw the loneliness in Ace's eyes as he stared into his mug. It looked like the bottom of the deep, dark sea. He wasn't drunk.

“Ace…“ I said, hesitating.

“ *Mrow* !” said Kotatsu.

The chanting and stomping of the crew came to a halt. The ship was quiet. Everyone followed Kotatu’s gaze, who was peering into the distance and growling. The wildcat was looking beyond the mist through which the bounty hunters’ ship had

gone. Another ship's silhouette was emerging.

"What's up? Are they coming back again?" Ace wondered, leaning forward. But soon there was more than one ship.

Many of them, in fact, all looming through the thick mist. It looked like a fleet...

"The Navy?!"

Soon the seagull insignia broke through

the sheet of white.

It was painted on a sail - the symbol that pirates dreaded. Below it was the familiar *MARINE* logo. Sure enough, the Navy had arrived. The battleships were on the move, and they were all coming our way.

"That's the Nailer's ship. Bad one to have on our tail," said Skull, pointing out the lead

ship. “The Nailer’s supposed to be a real nasty ensign.”

“That’s an odd epithet to have. Former shipwright or something?” Ace asked. Meanwhile, I gave orders to the other crewmates. “We need some distance!”

One battleship surged out in front of the others. If we had to deal with that one first,

the others would circle us in the meantime. They were already distancing themselves from one another, fanning out in a wide formation. We weren't going to let them get that far.

“There was a reef nearby, if I recall. Let’s change course to head there. Full speed! Unfurl the map, Teach!” I shouted to Mihal, who I

assumed was somewhere in the ship's library. I helmed the ship, wary of the Navy vessels right behind us, and rushed to and fro across the deck.

Suddenly, from very close by, an unfamiliar voice said, "This is a good ship."

It belonged to a young woman. I spun around in shock and saw a Navy sailor standing alone on the deck

nearby.

But this was not *just* a sailor. Like a cape flapping in the wind, she wore over her shoulders a white coat with the word “Justice” embroidered on the back. Only proper Naval officers were allowed to wear these coats.

“When did you —?!”

Somehow a Navy officer had jumped onto

our deck.

"I'm sad to say that your voyage ends here," the woman said, placing her hand on the narrow sword at her waist. I could see a nasty burn scar on the back of her hand.

There was a gunshot.

"Hmph!"

A clang. She snorted.

Without batting an

eye, she had drawn her sword and swung it through.

"Very impressive..." Mihal's voice came from some indeterminate location a moment later. It all happened in a blink. He had shot at her from his hiding place, and she had drawn her sword to deflect the bullet.

"You're a beast," I stammered, backing

away.

"Master Ace, that's the Nailer!" shouted Skull. The gunshot had drawn his attention to the woman on the deck.

"Oh yeah? I was imagining some big, burly carpenter guy. Why's she called the Nailer?"

"Apparently she puts holes in people as precisely as though she's pounding nails."

“Okay, that’s spooky,” said Ace, not looking spooked in the least. He strode forward.

Ace was cool and calm. So was the woman. She stared him straight in the eyes with conviction and clarity.

“I am Ensign Isuka. You must be Fire Fist Ace,” she said, in a powerful voice. She pointed the tip of her sword at him. “You are

under arrest."

"Hey..." Ace said, looking deadly serious as he stared back at her. "That sounds like a bird's name."

Instantly, the entire scene seemed to freeze.

What he said didn't match the tense mood of the situation in the least. And yet the officer who introduced herself as Isuka barely budged. She just kept her sword

pointed at Ace.

"Can you really slice me with that thing?" Ace teased, grinning like a little scamp. The outline of his body blurred with heat haze. In moments, the flickering turned into proper flame.

His entire body was fire. Ace's Flame-Flame Fruit powers were in full effect.

"If you wish, I will

riddle you with holes!” Isuka said, on the move before the words had left her mouth. Her narrow sword jabbed with blinding speed.

“Whoa!!”

Though made of fire, Ace was so surprised by the force of her attack that he instinctively dodged out of the way.

“Captain Ace!”

“We gotta help the

captain, boys!”

The crew surrounded Isuka at once, but she spun and swung her sword with incredible speed and ferocity. It was like she was surrounded by an invisible wall, so complete and dangerous was her defense. You could try to walk through that wall, but there was no way you wouldn’t emerge pierced

all over from that sharp, shining sword tip.

Isuka the Nailer. The name made much more sense now.

“Do not attempt to run, Ace! Cease your ineffective resistance and surrender to justice!” Isuka demanded as she attacked.

“So if my resistance *is* effective, would that be okay?” Ace teased,

avoiding her sword.

They couldn't be more different, I thought. But then something about Isuka's fighting style struck me as strange.

She was alone. We had many members. One could only expand so much stamina. With the way she fought, fatigue was bound to set in eventually. So why did she choose to come over

to the ship alone? She'd brought all these ships and men. Why not use them? It almost seemed like she was buying time...

By the time the thought occurred to me and I spun around to look, the Navy ships were already circling in our direction. Slowly but surely, they were completing their encirclement.

She used herself as a decoy!

She'd inserted herself into enemy territory to draw all attention to herself. Such boldness forced us to respond, and when there was a disruption such as this on the deck, sailing of course became an afterthought. Now the other Naval ships had surrounded us...

Suddenly it made

sense to me that one of the ships in particular had stuck tight to our tail. It was intended to keep us focused on just one direction without paying attention to the others.

"It's over now," said Isuka, pointing the tip of her sword at Ace.

" *Aaaaaaaaah* !"

Just then, there was a scream from off the ship. It had

obviously come from one of the Navy ships surrounding the Spade Pirates' vessel.

"Looks like we made it just in time," I muttered, relieved. We had reached our destination at sea in the nick of time.

"Were you so busy chasing after us that you failed to notice the rocks underwater?" I taunted, looking toward the

enemy ships - one of which in the blockade was noticeably tilting.

We had reached the reef.

If you passed this way without realizing it, you'd get stuck between the crashing waves and the underwater rocks and have no safe escape. If you were lucky, the rocks might scrape a hole in your bilge and sink you - as had just

happened to the ship nearby.

It was clear from the start that the enemy fleet was going to attempt to surround us. I didn't expect a senior officer to infiltrate our ship alone and distract us, but from our standpoint, we just needed to prevent them from forming a full blockade. That's why I had steered us over here:

to slip through the rocks and make an escape where they couldn't get in front of us.

They must have picked up speed and rammed right up onto one of the pointed rocks underwater. The battleship looked badly damaged; it was keeling farther and farther over by the moment. People and barrels toppled over the railing into the sea.

Waves are chaotic in a reef area like this. Among the craggy points, they swirled and crashed in unpredictable patterns. And because the churning water sharpened the rock formations, they could do a lot of damage to an unsuspecting victim.

"You could have just paid attention to the rocks and chosen not to chase us."

The fallen sailors were at the mercy of the waves. Even an experienced swimmer would have difficulty in these conditions. Isuka promptly sheathed her sword and placed a foot against the railing.

"What, are you running away now?" Ace demanded.

"I'm going to save them, you fool!" she cried, and jumped

straight between the whitecaps.

We rushed to the side of the ship to watch. Isuka swam cleanly through the choppy waves, reaching out for her struggling subordinates. When she got one, she would move him to a floating barrel or wood plank before heading to the next.

"She's incredible," Skull said, whistling in

admiration.

But the waves were just a bit too strong. Isuka was at their mercy. She'd get smashed by one, then pop her head out of the water a moment later, over and over. She gave every bit of flotsam to her subordinates, so she had nothing to hold on to herself.

Ace watched her struggle. Then, without

a word, he threw a flotation ring over the side. Isuka struggled against the waves but succeeded in grabbing the ring. Despite her predicament, she glared up at the Spade Pirates' ship, and Ace at its side, with fury in her eyes.

"Why did you save me?!" she bellowed.

"Dunno," Ace said simply. He turned his back on her.

"Fire Fist! I will capture you next time! I will make you *regret* helping me!" Isuka shouted after us, as our ship continued on its way.

"She's a good person," Ace said, looking back at the reef area as we passed.

A superior officer who prioritized saving her own subordinates over her personal goals -

in that sense, she *was* a good person. And the plan for her to slip onto the enemy ship alone to buy time was probably her idea, not just because she was the strongest on the ship.

But...

"I dunno, the thought of having such a fearsome woman chasing after us this whole time is kinda depressing," I said with

a sigh.

"Hey, it's better than that sweaty, beardy guy before her, right?"

"Well, that's true... I don't want to have to deal with *that* type ever again, either."

Ace and I shared a look and laughed.

"Well, time to get back to our celebration. C'mon, let's party!"

And with that, he revived the festivities.

Chapter Three

Our travel continued, putting us right before the New World.

The trip across the Grand Line was already half done. We were finishing up the first half.

Over time, the Spade Pirates had grown to comprise twenty members, one of whom was an animal. Ace and the rest of the crew were

viewed differently by other pirates by now, and in accordance with that, our captain's bounty rose higher and higher.

At this rate I almost expected us to plunge into the New World with great fanfare, but things did not turn out to be quite that simple. The first warning came from Skull, our almanac of

information.

"Coating?" Ace said, repeating the unfamiliar word.

We were in the lamplit ship's cabin. Ace was sitting in a chair, and at his feet was Kotatsu, a large form curled up into a compact ball. The giant cat was sleeping peacefully.

Skull had a sea chart open on the desk to facilitate his

explanation. “That’s right. We have to coat the ship in a special natural resin. That will allow us to sail into the water and pass along the ocean floor.”

The next stop, as indicated by the Log Pose we used for navigation, was Fish-Man Island, all the way down at the bottom of the sea. Obviously, we couldn’t get there with

our current setup. So we needed to have an expert coat our ship in order to get down there.

And the place we could that coating done?

"Saboady Archipelago..." Ace murmured, looking at Skull's map. It was a gathering of many islands, large and small. On Skull's suggestion, the Spade Pirates made their way for the

Saboady Archipelago.

"Technically, the 'islands' in the archipelago aren't even islands. Each one of them is a giant tree known as a Yarukiman Mangrove. The land at the base of each tree is just resting on its roots, and the roots are where the resin comes from."

"Ah, I see. And because they're not islands, you can stop

there and not have to worry about the Log being overwritten by the magnetic signal," I said, glancing at Skull's map too. There were seventy-nine islands on the chart, and they were all giant trees with people living on the roots. It was stunning to imagine.

"I've got my sights set on a good coater already. But it's guaranteed he'll take no

less than three full days.”

“A three-day delay?” Ace murmured, looking unhappy. He didn’t usually trouble himself with maps, so seeing him look at this one with such an expression of concern on his face was like seeing a fish out of water. It was very much like Ace to call it a delay rather than just a “stay”,

however.

"Is the food good, though?" he then asked, which was also a very Ace-like concern.

"The Saboady Archipelago is a major tourist spot at the entrance to the New World. I'm sure there are tons of places with great eats."

"Ahhh, good to know..." Ace murmured, but despite his pretense

of careful consideration, I could see that his countenance was brightening. He couldn't hide his excitement at the prospect of the trip ahead.

"So is this spot with the skull a place we should avoid?" Ace asked, pointing out a large symbol on the sea chart.

Skull was affronted by this question. "What

do you mean, Master Ace? That's *my* symbol. In other words, that's the place I want to go. The destination. That's where we're heading now."

"Oh... But... Am I the only one who's a little uneasy about that symbol?"

"What? Really?! Fine, then..."

Skull pulled out a pen, dippied in in red

ink, then drew a large heart around the skull.

Ace gave me a skeptical look. I couldn't disagree with him. Our ship continued on its way until we approached the Saboady Archipelago at last. We were nearly to the mark on the map that Skull had identified as our destination. Out on the deck, we looked up at the majestic trees

overhead.

"They're huge..." I murmured, not realizing I had spoken out loud. The size of them was unimaginable.

A special natural resin oozed from the roots of the massive trees, and that was the material that made the coating process possible. As the roots took in air, they exhaled it through the resin to

form huge bubbles that floated up into the sky. Such bubbles were constantly floating around the archipelago in countless numbers.

The sunlight reflected off the surface of the bubbles in a rainbow array. It was such a wondrous, fantastical sight that it left me speechless. In the distance was a large Ferris wheel surrounded

by floating bubbles.

I felt like I was dreaming. It was painful to admit that I couldn't even have come up with words to describe the beauty that surrounded me.

"No. Can't let that stop me now," I said, snapping back to business. I pulled a notebook from my coat and began to write a description of this fairy-

tale sight. Every word I could think of, I wrote down. My pen flew across the small page.

In fact, the words came to me freely and smoothly at that moment. My talent for writing almost frightened me. Maybe this writing thing was going to work out after all.

Then I heard some muttering from people

looking over my shoulder.

"What's this? 'Crazy trees. Totally stripey'? What is that supposed to mean?"

" 'Floating soap-bubbly things. The only word I can come up with is amazing. Where will these bubbles take me?' You planning on floating off somewhere, man?"

" 'Is it right for a man who never puts

down roots to live on top of roots? I say it is! Viva Saboady!' What the heck is this?"

I screamed, "*Aaaaaah* ! Don't read it, you guys!"

The deck erupted in laughter.

"H-hey, I thought you — *heh heh heh* ! — you were going to write an adventure journal!"

"I dunno, *huh huh* , th-this might be out of

your range, man," the sailors teased, stifling their laughter.

"Th-this is just notes for an outline! I'm jotting down a general plot! It's going to be way better when I'm done with it. Be patient!"

"Sure, sure. Can't wait to read it."

"If you're gonna go to the trouble, you might as well write something good. Make

me the hero while you're at it," said one of the sailors as they returned to their positions. I watched them go and swore to myself that if I ever did complete this tale of my adventures, I would *never* include their names.

The Spade Pirates' ship wove its way between gigantic roots breaching the surface of

the sea. We headed for a place away from prying eyes where we could moor and disembark.

The Saboady Archipelago had a proper port, of course, but we were staying away. For one thing, we needed to be in the area for at least three days while our ship got coated. What would be the point of starting the coating process if we

were spotted by the Navy, bounty hunters, or unscrupulous pirates in the meantime?

There were several lawless areas within the spacious archipelago where the government couldn't enforce its will, and we chose one of them as our destination. If anything, a lawless district would be more comfortable and familiar than staying somewhere

the Navy might attempt to seize our ship while it was incapacitated.

We found a spot nestled deep between the giant roots and quietly maneuvered our ship inside. Once we started preparing to moor it to the roots, Skull warned the crew, “It’s not just the Navy and bounty hunters to watch for. There are world nobles and

slavers, too... Lots of danger around. Stay out of trouble until our coating is done."

Especially you , he seemed to say, looking at Ace. "I'm talking to you, Master Ace."

"Huh? How come?" Ace asked. He had been staring at the island with sparkling eyes.

"I said, we don't want to get into any trouble while we're

here...“

“Yeah, yeah, I get it. Hey, do you think those Graman things are any good?”

“I don’t think you *do* get it.”

Graman were steamed buns filled with sweet bean paste that were a specialty of the islands. Clearly, all Ace could think about was what he would eat once he got off the ship.

Skull sighed and shot me a look. I knew what he was trying to say, so I grimaced and reassured him, “I’ll keep watch over him. If nobody keeps tabs on Ace, he’s likely to go and light some world nobles on fire or something.”

“Whoa, don’t even say that! I might be an intel guy, but even I wasn’t anticipating something like that!

Don’t you do it! Don’t you dare do it! And that’s *not* a reverse dare!” Skull shouted, suddenly panicked. I laughed, and after a moment so did he. In the meantime, the ship came to a complete stop. We had arrived.

With the delicate job of maneuvering the ship to the shore completed, the crew was suddenly more relaxed.

“Yeah, running into the world nobles would be kind of a mess, but as long as I don’t catch the eye of the Navy, I’m not worried about any—”

“There you are, Fire Fist! We meet again!” said a familiar voice, right as Skull was saying, “-one… else…“

Skull’s head creaked and turned like a rusty gear toward the sound of the new voice.

I glanced over the side of the ship, fearing what I would see there.

"Come out peacefully! *This* time you're under arrest!" said the bold voice. I didn't need to see her to know it was Isuka. She stood there on the shore, arms crossed, looking up at the ship.

"There she is again..."

"How many times

has it been now?”

Her appearance got the crew murmuring amongst themselves. Not out of fear, though — it was more annoyance than anything else.

Ever since we’d entered the Grand Line, the ensign had been constantly badgering our ship. Isuka was obsessed with arresting Ace; each time we shook her off and got away, she’d

appear at our next destination to harass us again. Given that we were still sailing safely along, it was obvious that she had not succeeded at her goal. Ace was still a perfectly free man.

"Hey, it's Isuka. Whatcha doin' here? On vacation?" Ace called out from the deck of the ship. He sounded quite unconcerned.

“Of course I’m not on vacation! I’ve come here to arrest you, you fool!”

“Oh yeah? Hey, what kind of local specialties do they have here, aside from Graman?”

“You want souvenir recommendations? I bought Grasen rice crackers for my subordinates. They do keep well... Hey, I just

said I wasn't on vacation!" Isuka shouted, but I, and probably everyone else present, had the same thought:

She's on vacation …

Definitely on vacation …

She's clearly on a vacation…

For one thing, she wasn't wearing her usual Navy uniform. She was

in rather conspicuous casual tourist clothes. She must have spotted the ship while enjoying some free time. How could we have managed to run into this particular individual in the entire vast stretch of the archipelago? It seemed like fate working its magic...

Simply put, Isuka was a “good guy”.

She had a strong

sense of justice, and she was dedicated and honest to a fault,

In a fight, she was tremendously powerful, but she always lacked a finishing move when push came to shove. This was how Ace consistently slipped away from her - he could always get away when he needed to.

It had become a pattern, the punchline of

our every encounter.

Isuka was a familiar figure to all of us in the Spade Pirates, not just Ace. She would probably protest this description, but she seemed like less of a Navy officer and more of an oddball who showed up wherever we did just to liven up the mood.

"Sheesh... At least she didn't bring her men along this time," Skull

said with relief. Isuka was all alone, most likely because she was enjoying some shore leave. “I’m sure we can manage her like usual if she’s on her own.”

That was how little respect Isuka had earned from the Spade Pirates.

“Yeah, we can hide the ship again later,” I agreed, noticing the vast difference in enthusiasm between Ace and Isuka.

“Come down here, Fire Fist! Surrender yourself, if you know what’s good for you!”

“Don’t think we’ll be able to get off the ship for a while,” I sighed, grudgingly impressed by the determination of the woman down below, who continued to shout up at us.

“She’s stubborn. I’m jealous, in a way. Wish there was a stubborn

woman chasing after *me* like that."

Skull had always admired Isuka for her tenacity and refusal to give up on chasing us.

"But she's Navy," I reminded him softly.

"Yeah, I know, I know..." Skull sighed.

"You're going to get your ship coated, aren't you? There won't be any escape!" Isuka promised, and laughed. I wondered

when she was going to lose her voice from all the shouting.

Eventually I began to tune her out. After a moment, my stomach growled. I wanted to disembark and get something to eat on the island, but that wasn't possible now. I'd have to eat leftovers on the ship and wait until Isuka got tired and gave me a chance to slip away.

“Hey Ace, I guess I’ll just eat—” I started to say, before I realized that Ace was not on the deck. Belatedly, I realized that he had stopped responding to Isuka’s taunts a while ago.

“Dammit!” I swore.

Down on the shore, Isuka was still in the exact spot where she had first appeared, looking up at the ship

with her arms crossed. She hadn't even moved her face from one to the other.

"I mean, really, how blinkered can you be?!"

Unbelievably enough, Isuka kept her eyes trained directly up at that side of the ship the entire time. Knowing she'd be that way, Ace simply hopped off in a different direction where

she wasn't looking.

"Hah! Have you gone silent because you're terrified, knowing there is no escape, Fire Fist?! At long last, your reckoning has come! Fire Fist! Are you listening to me? Answer me! What's wrong with you? Have you fallen asleep?! Fire Fist!"

He's obviously made a getaway already .

I stared down at

Isuka with pity in my eyes as she continued shouting and wailing. Ace was probably strolling along the market stands in town by now, picking out whatever looked tasty.

But suddenly…

“Where’s Ace?”

The door to the ship’s interior opened a crack with a creaking sound that seemed unnecessarily slow and

creepy. Peering out through the crack was the man who hardly ever showed his face: Mihal.

"Teach! What a rare surprise," I exclaimed when I spotted his glasses and whiskers through the doorframe.

Though he called himself a teacher, Mihal never showed his face in public unless giving an

official lesson. He generally stayed shut inside his library even when we reached a new island. If he dared to venture within a step of the outside world, then something bad must be happening.

Mihal reached an arm out toward the deck, treating the door almost like a shield. There was something clutched in his hand.

“Ace’s wallet fell on the floor outside my cabin…“

I went pale. Something bad *had* happened.

“H-he doesn’t… h-have… any money? And he went… into town… for f-food?”

“This is bad news, Master Deu,” bellowed Skull, grabbing my shirt. “We’re gonna be here for three whole days!”

“Y-you said you’d watch over him!”

“I didn’t think he was going to disappear *that* fast!”

“W-what do we do now?! He’s going to torch a world noble at this rate!”

“Is he?! Would he really do something like that?!”

Skull and I quaked with fear imagining the worst possible scenario.

It would take three days to coat our ship. We couldn't leave this place until then - we were stuck. So we had to avoid any unnecessary trouble during this time. It was bad enough that Isuka had spotted us the moment we dropped anchor here...

"Dammit, I gotta go after him! You take care of the ship!"

I snatched the

wallet out of Mihal's hand and jumped overboard to go after Ace.
Isuka still stood in front of the ship, feet firmly planted in place and shouting at the top of her lungs. But, as I suspected, she was barely paying attention. All I had to do was sneak away out of the corner of her eye, and I was free. This must have

been how Ace got away too.

First, I headed for the crowds in search of Ace. Large bubbles were rising from the ground ahead of me. I rushed onward, dodging both people and bubbles. It felt very strange to be running atop roots instead of proper soil.

I couldn’t help but notice vehicles and buildings making use of

the durable bubbles. Not only were the resin-secreting roots the solid ground of these islands, they were also an economic engine supporting the people who lived here. I passed by the island's industries and headed for the commercial area.

Once there, I found Ace right away. Or, more accurately, I found a trail of cooks and stall

managers chasing after him.

"Eat-and-run!"

"He went that way!"

Angry shouts filled the market. The lanes were full of angry workers from all manner of food stands. Clearly, this situation was the result of Ace making the rounds without any money.

I would find him

leading the line of angry, shoving workers, I was sure. But it wasn't a situation I could navigate in that circumstance. There had to be a better way to get through them to reach him...

I steeled myself for action. My eyes shone.

"All right, looks like this is going to require some negotiation... I'll need

you people to get out of my way!”

I shook out my shoulders and fists, then grabbed the man standing at the very end of the line. “Hey.”

When the intimidating fellow turned around to glare at me, I gave him my most simpering smile. “How much do we owe you?”

In this manner I

made my way through the line, paying each food worker and apologizing in turn. I finally caught a glimpse of Ace in a bubble-themed amusement area called Saboady Park, beneath the Ferris wheel. Apparently he'd been lured here by the scent of the food stalls.

Eventually I finished paying the last

of the food merchants chasing after Ace and made it to his side, panting and wheezing. He was sitting on a bench near the Ferris wheel and - believe it or not - he was fast asleep. In fact, he was sleeping with his cheeks still completely stuffed with food. There was a half-eaten skewer in either hand, which must’ve been the food I'd just

paid for.

"If you eat food... you *pay for it* !" I said, like a mother giving a child etiquette lessons, and then I chop-slammed Ace on the forehead.

" *Mmmlp* ?!"

Ace woke up, his cheeks bulging. He gazed around sleepily, blinked, and swallowed everything in his mouth in one gulp.

“ *Pwaaah* , that was good. I sure ate and ran a lot. In fact, I ran so much that I’m hungry again.”

“How in the world does your body work?”

He chowed down on the remaining bits of meat left on his skewers, then headed for another food stall, so I tossed him his wallet. “Here. Don’t cause any more trouble.”

“My wallet! Is it… lighter than I remember?”

“Of course it is.”

“Hm…“

He didn’t seem to be able to put two and two together. I sighed: my job was done. I glanced up at the giant wheel overhead, listening to the children shrieking with delight.

The rotating wheel

looked huge from below, and it was even more beautiful up close than it was from our ship. The gondolas shone with the iridescence of the bubbles, rotating slowly and catching the sunlight.

It must be an incredible view from the top , I thought. But it wasn't the kind of thing a grown man could do on his own. Especially

not a pirate...

Eventually Ace came back from the food stands and said, “What, you wanna ride it?”

“Who, me? A Ferris wheel? I’m not a little kid,” I snorted.

“You ever been on one before?”

“Well, no...“

“Then now’s the time. We’re here anyway, so let’s ride it!” Ace said. He slapped me

on the back.

At Ace's urging, I headed toward the ride. I made a show of being reluctant about it, but the truth was, I was excited on the inside. The endlessly smiling ride attendant motioned toward the step, and one of the bubble-made gondolas slowly approached.

"There you go! Do enjoy the wonderful

sights of Saboady Archipelago!” said the attendant, putting a hand on the gondola door.

“I’ve found you at last, Fire Fist!” shouted Isuka, appearing out of nowhere and shoving her way into the gondola with a fierce look in her eyes.

“Wha— H-hey, don’t…!” I yelped, getting squashed against

the side.

“I’ve had enough of your sneaking and running about! Why didn’t you just come out the front of your ship?!”

“Because you were there.”

“What?! So… so you should do it anyway! You’re a man, aren't you?”

“Don’t be crazy!”

She rounded into him with accusations,

which Ace protested. But just at that moment, there was an unpleasant clicking sound from behind Isuka.

“Huh…?”

She turned around. The door of the gondola was locked.

The Ferris wheel began to turn again, and there was nothing to do about it now. I couldn’t believe how uncomfortable it was inside of the

gondola. How did we end up here?

I sat on the bench, hunched up awkwardly against the wall. Next to me, Ace gazed happily out the window at the scenery.

Sitting across from us and looking rather grumpy was Isuka. She didn't spare a glance outside, just glared at the two of us in silence.

I wanna get off this

thing !

We had barely started moving, and already I could hardly take it. I felt like I was going to suffocate. How could there be a Navy officer and pirates riding together in the same Ferris wheel gondola?

There was no way to enjoy the view. It was like being in prison. Were we still going up? When would we get

back to the ground? I never knew the agonizingly slow movement of the wheel could be so terrifying.

I want to get back down ... No , wait . What'll happen when we get there ?

Since there was nothing any of us could do in the cramped gondola, Isuka was behaving for now. But who knew what she

would try once we were back on solid ground?

What'll happen to us when we're on the surface again ?!

I inhaled and groaned. This was hell. It was hell inside the gondola, and hell waiting when I got back out of it.

But while I was squirming around feeling sorry for myself, Ace simply said, "So

once the bubbles get a certain distance off the ground, they pop, huh?" He was the only one of us who was actually ooh-ing and ahh-ing over the view.

Ace, buddy, how can you be so calm over there? Isuka's sitting right here, staring daggers at you. In fact, I might even say she's staring laser beams at you .

I was so alarmed

by the situation that I could hardly look at her. Instead, I stared at Isuka's hands to avoid the ferocity of her gaze. One of them featured a very nasty burn scar. I'd noticed that scar the first time I ever saw her, in fact. Up close like this, it was clear that the scar was quite old.

"Curious?" she asked me, rather suddenly.

I was so startled that I jumped. Silence settled over the gondola.

"I asked, are you curious about my burn?" she repeated.

Now that I understood her meaning, I mumbled, "Uh... yeah, I mean, no..."

"It's all right," she said, smiling. "This happened when I was a kid. Pirates attacked the village where I was

born. Within moments it was a sea of flames. The fire took my parents…“

The word ‘fire’ elicited a reaction from Ace, albeit a subtle one. He continued to stare silently out the window, however.

“I was trapped by the flames and smoke. It was a Navy officer who raced to the scene and actually saved me. That was Lieutenant

Commander Dorrow, although he's been promoted - he's Vice Admiral Dorrow now. He's the reason I wanted to join the Navy," she explained, tracing her burn scar.

"Every time I look at this hand, I remember my youth. I don't want any other children to have to go through what I did. That's why I swore an oath to lock up all

the villainous pirates," Isuka continued, smiling gently. Her burn was both a painful memory and a signpost guiding her future way.

It occurred to me that this was the first time I'd ever seen her looking so peaceful and pleasant. Maybe it just seemed that way because she wasn't wearing her usual Navy uniform. Or maybe...

“Listen to me, Fire Fist,” she said, at the end of her story. “Quit the pirate life.”

It was so unexpected, I gasped.

“From what I can tell, you don’t seem like a bad person.”

Time seemed to slow down inside the gondola. I suddenly realized that the shouting and screaming

of the children at the amusement park had drifted away. We were near the top of the ride. Ace continued to look out the window without offering a word.

"W-what are you saying?" I asked the ensign, stunned. "Q-quit being pirates? If we're not pirates... then... what *are* we?

She cut off my stammering. "If you

have nowhere else to go, come to the Navy. I can give you a personal recommendation."

Isuka was staring at Ace, her eyes passionate and full of intent. "I'm sure you would look good in a Navy uniform. We can take care of all of your friends together. What do you think? It's not a bad deal, is it?"

This lady's crazy …

I was at a loss for words. But Isuka was clearly dead serious. She was seriously, honestly trying to recruit Ace and the Spade Pirates to the Navy.

Since we'd entered the Grand Line, she'd been our enemy at each and every island we'd visited. Navy and pirates could never be anything other than pursuer and pursued, hunter and

prey - so how could she possibly suggest such a thing with a straight face?

Perhaps, through our many evasions, Isuka had begun to accept Ace not as a pirate, but as an individual. Pirates caused the death of her parents, so she viewed all pirates as evil - until she had seen enough of Ace to realize that he

wasn't that bad.

Ace maintained his silence throughout her speech.

Then there was a familiar clicking sound.

"Hey, the door's open," Ace said, turning back with a worried look. Somehow the lock on the gondola had come undone. Air was rushing into the cramped interior from the open doorway.

“You’re not supposed to open— I mean, it’s not supposed to be open like that!”

The gondola door was wide open at the very top of the wheel. I’d thought Ace had just been looking out the window in silence this whole time, but apparently he’d been tinkering with the door all along.

“Sh-shut the door!

It's dangerous!" I told him, but Ace was already rising from his seat.

"Actually, I'm getting hungry, so I'm gonna jump down first."

" *Huh* ?!" I screamed, as Ace leaned his body out of the doorway.

"Wait," said Isuka. "You haven't given me an answer yet." Her arms and legs were

crossed, and she wasn't budging an inch from her seat.

"Quit pirating to be a Navy man? Afraid I can't do that," said Ace, turning back to face her. His eyes were the color of the bottom of the sea, like I'd seen once before.

But it only lasted an instant. Just as quickly, a cheerful smile was on his face. "Later, Isuka," he said, and

jumped out, landing on the roof of the next gondola down and bounding off of it. In midair, fire erupted from his body.

He bounded from roof to roof down the series of descending cars, like going down a flight of stairs. It was the most dynamic method of descent I could have imagined.

Eventually he

reached the ground and waved up at us. Isuka and I watched him rush away in total silence. Our gondola passed the apex of the wheel and began to descend.

"What now?" I said at last, unable to bear the silence.

"What now, what?"

"Ace isn't going to stop being a pirate. And the Spade Pirates will continue to follow him.

So no matter what, we'll only be enemies in the future."

"I suppose that's true..." Isuka said, slightly disappointed.

"Are you just... going to take me hostage?" I asked. Obviously, I hoped the answer was no. "If you do, Ace will come and rescue me rather than running away. That's just the kind of guy he

is.”

Isuka only grimaced. “Since when does a person on the side of justice take hostages? Fool,” she said. Then, much quieter, she muttered, “That’s exactly why I want him on my side.”

The gondola slowly made its way back down. My trip on the Ferris wheel would soon come to an end.

When the ground approached, Isuka made a big show of turning away from me in a huff.

"I'll be back to try again. You're free to go today," she said. "The truth is, I'm not on duty now. I was on leave."

"Yeah, I know."

I climbed out of the little gondola booth, leaving Isuka behind in her conspicuously obvious vacation

clothes.

Ace spent the entire time the coating was being done walking around the islands and eating food. He made the most of his brief time on land, never returning to the ship.

The others on the crew also busied themselves while enjoying their three-day stay.

In typical fashion,

Mihal did not leave the ship, even while it was getting coated.

Skull attended and observed the coating process as the ship's representative. Others patched up holes, repaired various fixtures, and cleaned up the ship in the meantime.

Some went out to purchase supplies, food, and weapons for the journey into the New

World, some joined Kotatsu in sleeping all day long, some enjoyed extravagant vacations, and some strode the backstreets with purpose, hunting the pirate-hunters. The three-day stop passed in a blink.

I had become Ace's money handler by default, it seemed. So I had no choice but to wander the archipelago

with him. That in itself wasn't so bad - what was annoying was the fact that he commanded such a high bounty that he was attacked by bounty hunters and glory-seeking pirates at every turn.

Naturally, Ace easily crushed any and all comers so that he could continue enjoying his meals.

In a way, it was

smart for Ace not to return to the ship. There was no point in leading his pursuers to where his ship was, stuck in place until the coating was finished.

But Ace wasn't thinking about any of this. He just wandered around, walking into every establishment that looked interesting to him...

On the third day,

the coating was nearly complete. I hadn't seen Isuka at all since our first day. Perhaps her leave time was over, and she'd gone back to her base. No — she was going to show up again, this time with her subordinates. The thought of returning to face *that* made me feel gloomy.

Ace was roaming around and snacking

again today. He really seemed to like those Grasen rice crackers, as recommended by Isuka, and he bought so many that he had a bundle of them stuffed under each arm.

The crackers crunched and crumbled and disappeared at an alarming pace. They were packed in attractive boxes, intended to be given to

others as souvenirs, but Ace was ripping the boxes open and devouring them right on the spot.

"How many boxes are you going to eat?" I asked, aghast.

"I shoulda bought more," he said. "I'm not gonna get full on these."

I would have thought he'd be sick of them by now, but instead he was unhappy

that he hadn't gotten enough. We'd also been dealing with bounty hunters while we bought Grasen packages, so the transaction had ultimately been very hasty. Ace seemed to want more than we'd purchased at the time.

The bounty hunters were probably shocked to see such a highly-valued target strolling around a tourist

attraction, buying local souvenirs. Sometimes fame just isn't worth the trouble.

Even later, several groups of unsavory-looking figures stepped up to Ace. He had no trouble defeating all of them. But in the act of tussling with them and heading away from trouble we had moved from the crowded city center and farther into

the slums.

It was gloomy and much quieter here than where the tourists were. Trash littered the area, and most of the buildings looked abandoned.

"I'm getting hungry... Wonder if they sell any Grasen around here," Ace said, glancing around despite the fact that he was already holding several boxes of

them under his arms. This was a more dangerous area, clearly, where no tourists were likely to venture. Nobody would set up a rice cracker shop here.

In fact, not only were there no stores, there were no people here, either. The fact that we were wandering around outside must have made us stick out like sore thumbs. I could see

young children peering out from the crumbling buildings. They appeared to be street urchins.

Ace promptly beckoned to them. They approached us suspiciously, until Ace started handing out the boxes of Grasen he was carrying. Then their faces lit up with smiles, and they raced away holding the boxes like

precious objects. The gloomy, depressing back alley seemed just a bit nicer than a moment before.

He'd given away every last one of his Grasen boxes. I asked him, "You really mean to do that, Ace?"

"Yeah. I just realized I'm totally full," he said, watching the children go. It put a smile on my face too.

Just when we were looking for the right path back to the ship, I saw a figure emerge from a back alleyway, and I couldn't help but groan, "Ugh, not now..."

There was Isuka, coat flapping brilliant and white in the breeze, looking completely out of place in the slum. She was in her Naval uniform this time - meaning she was here

on duty. Her appearance caught me off guard, because I had expected that if anything, she'd strike at the moment we were leaving.

"Ah, there's two of you this time," Ace noted with interest. Standing behind Isuka was not her usual group of subordinates, but a man in an officer's uniform. Like her, he wore a coat with the

word *Justice* on the back.

"Wait," Isuka said, when we tensed up. "I'm just here to talk this time."

She and the man walked around the corner into the lane to face us. They did not draw weapons or make an aggressive move.

"Rejoice, Fire Fist! I have good news!" she said, eyes alight. She

motioned to the man with her. “This is Vice Admiral Dorrow. He’s the man who saved me as a child.”

“Let’s keep this brief, Ensign Isuka,” said Dorrow, stepping forward. He was about a head taller than Ace, and very well built. It was a pretty intimidating sight when you were standing next to him. We were in the

presence of a very large man.

"This is for you, Fire Fist Ace," Dorrow said, pulling a letter from his coat and opening it to show Ace.

"S-Seven Warlords...?!" I yelped when I caught sight of the letter. I could scarcely believe my eyes.

The letter was from the World Government.

The Five Elders, the council that was the highest level of power in the government, wanted to recruit Ace to join the Seven Warlords.

The Warlords formed one of the great power centers on the Grand Line; everyone knew who they were. They were essentially privateers - pirates whose activity was sanctioned by the

government, as long as it served as a balancing force *against* other pirates rising in the ranks. To be a Warlord of the Sea, you had to be powerful and infamous. And now Ace was being recommended for the title.

"There, isn't that good news? Now you don't have to quit being a pirate!" Isuka said happily. Ace had turned

down her officer in the Ferris wheel because he wasn't about to stop being a pirate. But being one of the Seven Warlords meant aligning yourself with the World Government, and cooperating with the Navy.

That was the price to be paid for the benefits: the government gave you a pardon, removed your bounty,

and allowed you to continue your pirating activities as long as you paid a proper share to the authorities as well.

But Ace wasn't interested.

“Warlords? No thanks,” he said promptly.

“W-why not…? All you have to do is accept, and the Navy will stop chasing you,” Isuka said, stunned. She was right;

it was a good offer. There were plenty of people who would do anything for the title of Warlord of the Sea. It wasn't like just anyone could get it. And Ace turned it down without even thinking it over.

"Sorry, I just don't like the whole Seven Warlords system," he said.

"What?!"

Isuka was shocked.

She clearly had never considered the possibility that he might reject the offer. But Dorrow hardly batted an eye. If anything, he now wore a quiet little smile.

"What a coincidence, Ace. Turns out I've been thinking the exact same thing," Dorrow said chuckling. He held up the letter and tore the paper in two.

“Vice Admiral! Why did you—?!”

“What’s the point of a trained, servile pirate? Better to get rid of them altogether. Isn’t that right, Ace?”

Suddenly, Dorrow’s fist was raised.

“ *Hmph* !” It roared through the air, gouging at the place Ace had just been standing.

“Heh. Pretty violent, aren’t we?”

smirked Ace, who had dodged out of the way of the attack in the nick of time.

“Dammit! I thought this was just going to be a discussion!” I wailed, retreating to a safe distance.

“Wait, Vice Admiral!” pleaded Isuka. “We were only supposed to be talking about the offer today!”

“Talking? Haven't

we finished talking, Ensign Isuka? Ace doesn't like the Warlords.
Coincidentally, I don't like them either. And whether Warlord or not, I just plain don't like pirates. I'm very glad that he turned down the offer in my presence. Because now it gives me a perfect opportunity to destroy Fire Fist Ace the pirate, right here and

now!”

Dorrow shrugged off his officer’s coat. The action revealed a very odd object underneath. Dorrow had cylindrical weapons harnessed to both of his arms. They looked a bit like bazookas or tonfas, but tubes attached to the back of each cylinder ran to containers that hung behind each flank. So this contraption was

the reason he looked so solidly built.

"Let's run a test and find out which is stronger - *this* , or the Flame-Flame Fruit," said Dorrow, smirking. His eyes gleamed with murderous glee.

"C'mon, Ace, let's get outta—" I started to yell.

"You're not going anywhere."

Fierce jets of flame

shot from the ends of the cylinders. They were flamethrowers. So those tubes connected to fuel tanks in the back. The ferocious stream of fire completely cut off our escape route.

Within seconds, everything around us was on fire. The buildings caught fire, and I heard the nearby children screaming. They were trapped by

the flames, and unable to escape.

"What in the world do you think you're doing?!" Ace demanded, rushing toward the children. Dorrow took the opportunity to sharpen his aim.

" *There* you are."

The flame licked over the ground directly toward Ace. He spread his hands and turned his body into fire to stop the

stream. Without enough oxygen to feed both fires, his bodily flames canceled out the flamethrower's jets.

"Please, Vice Admiral! Stop this!" Isuka pleaded, her face pale. "The children!"

"Children? What are you talking about, Ensign? I'm just attacking pirates, making sure they cannot escape. If you let pirates

run free, *that* is what causes misery to so many children out there. Am I wrong, Ensign?”

Dorrow wasn’t even looking at her. All of his attention was focused on Ace, at whom he continued to blast fire.

Ace, meanwhile, was stuck in place. The force of the flamethrowers was so great that he couldn’t

push forward at all. And if he stepped backward, the flames would hit the helpless children. There was nothing he could do.

“ *Raaaaaah* !”

I rushed at Dorrow and tackled him from the side.

“What the…?!”

Clearly, he wasn’t expecting me to jump on him. Shock flitted across

his face.

At this close proximity, the searing heat made my skin boil. I could feel my clothes and hair starting to char. But still, I clung to Dorrow and refused to let go. Isuka promptly rushed to the children's side.

"Come on! This way, hurry!" she said, working busily to free the children while Ace

was immobilized. She reached through the gap in the collapsed building to get to them. I could see the childhood scar on her hand. She must have reached through the flames like this when she lost her parents, too.

I couldn't imagine the sadness and fear she felt back then. How much inner strength would it require to do the same thing now to

save these innocent children?

In the midst of the boiling flames, the word “Justice” flickered on the back of her coat. Once I’d made sure that Isuka had the children out and safe, I grinned to myself. Now Ace could move again...

“What... do you think... you’re doing?!”

Dorrow was furious. He rammed a

knee into my stomach.

“ *Urgh* !”

Once, twice, three times... but I still held tight to him.

“Let go of me!”

He gave one more particularly hard blow, and I collapsed, spitting up stomach acid. It felt like my insides had been mashed into a blob. I could hardly breathe. The heat coming off of the flamethrowers only

made the pain worse.

But I'd done my job. Through the agony and gagging, I smiled.

"I pulled... 'em out... sucker..."

"Huh? Pulled what —" Dorrow started, glaring down at me. Then he noticed something was wrong. "My fuel tanks?!"

The tubes attaching the flamethrowers to the fuel tanks at his sides

were disconnected. The liquid was now seeping out and covering his clothes.

I hadn't just been clinging on for dear life. I had grabbed the tubes supplying his weapon with power and wrenched them free. Without any fuel to shoot through the flamethrowers...

"*Tsk* !"

Dorrow clicked his

tongue. The jets of flame from his weapons were rapidly weakening. And even worse for him, another fire was pushing back the stream, getting closer and closer.

It was Ace.

Ace's fist slammed into Dorrow's face. Blazing fire enveloped his head.

" *Aaagh* !"

"Hang in there, Deuce!" he said, helping

me up. But a moment later, his body was floating off the ground. Dorrow had a hand around Ace's neck and was lifting him up. He swept aside the flame as though batting away a fly. He was perfectly unharmed.

The punch had landed. But Dorrow smiled it off, totally unaffected. And strangely, although Ace

had turned into flames right then, the man continued to grip him around the neck anyway.

"Is this... Haki...?" Ace said, grimacing.

Haki.

I'd heard that word - it was the name of a subconscious power within people, which could be drawn upon after long arduous training. Many of the

mightiest members of the Navy could wield the power of Haki. Especially strong Haki would easily overpower the abilities of a Devil Fruit. For example… by making one capable of grabbing fire with their bare hands.

"Fire Fist Ace… do not trifle with me. Your cheap little flames cannot stop me. Pirates like you are a dime a

dozen in the New World.”

He lifted Ace by the neck, his grip as strong as a vise. Ace struggled and his limbs flopped.

“You don’t have what it takes to go on from here. Your fun little days in the pirate business are over - I’ll see to that . The strength of justice is putting you into early retirement!”

"Heh! You put children in harm's way... and you talk... about justice?!" Ace grunted, writing in pain.

"No, you're wrong. I didn't put the children in harm's way. *You* did that, Ace," Dorrow growled in his deep voice. "This only happened because there were pirates here! Do you understand that, Ace? The children

suffered because you were here. I am only doing my job - capturing pirates - to the best of my ability. But you can't say the same. You're not supposed to be alive. Your very existence causes people who have committed no sin to live in fear. You must accept that."

Ace was silent. His resistance began to wane. I didn't miss the

dark shadow that passed briefly over his features.

"Crazy... bastard!" I shouted, and went into another coughing fit. I didn't have the strength to stand yet. "Don't... listen to him, Ace! He's... wrong!"

But Dorrow's powerful voice drowned me out. "If it weren't for you, no one would have this misfortune. Am I wrong? If not for pirates,

I would have no reason to go around setting things on fire."

Ace had given up struggling. His very life was hanging on the brink at this moment.

"It's... not true... is it, Vice Admiral?" Isuka said, all of a sudden. She had returned from helping the children escape. "I thought it was the pirates... who set my village on fire..." There

were tears in her eyes. “And then… you… saved me…”

“Of course I will save a wounded child right before my eyes. I am on the side of justice, after all.”

“Then, my parents…”

“What are you going on about, Ensign Isuka? Some sacrifices are necessary to properly carry out

justice. You know this is true. Why would you get all worked up about the loss of a few civilians here and there?”

Isuka crumbled on the spot. She put her hand to her mouth, holding back her cries, tears dripping from her cheeks. To Dorrow, they were just a few meaningless sacrifices, no big deal. But to Isuka, this meant the loss of

her parents, and the village where she was raised. It was a cruel, ironic end to the shining image of justice she'd adhered to since that traumatic childhood incident.

With Isuka's sobs in my ears, I got to my feet in quiet anger. "Dorrow, you called yourself? If I were you, I wouldn't make Ace too angry."

I spat out the blood

pooling in my mouth. The flames were already surging from Ace's body again. Power returned to his eyes.

"What do you mean? I told you, flames this feeble mean nothing to..."

Suddenly Dorrow paused. The fuel staining his clothes was on fire. Ace did not hesitate to release his own fire on the fuel tanks.

“You rat!” Dorrow shrieked.

He exploded - the fuel tanks burst right next to him. Ace was blasted free, then got to his feet and headed slowly back toward the man.

“ *Gah* ... You... miserable...” Dorrow hissed, standing unsteadily.

Ace stared into his face, unfazed by the

force of the blast or the wounds he sustained from the tank's shrapnel. "Perhaps my flames can't hurt you because you can use Haki. But," he said, raising a fist. "Haki can't extinguish the flames of rage."

Dorrow punched back. They traded blows, power against power.

"Dammit! Why... why won't you go down?!"

The larger man began to fatigue. Ace's punches were doing serious damage to Dorrow now.

"Impossible... how?! Unless... you, too..." Shock entered his eyes.

"You mocked him and underestimated him," I said quietly. Dorrow knew too little about Ace. He didn't know that Ace,

regardless of his powers and abilities, was simply a tremendous fighter - and that he was continuously growing stronger through battle.

“ *Gaaah* !” Dorrow stumbled after one of Ace’s punches. The blows were completely overwhelming him now. “Impossible... How... how?!”

He was out of breath, his face twisted

with pain.

"How can *you* use Haki?!"

"How should I know?!"

Flame burst from Ace's arms. With fire as the propulsion driving the thrust of his fists, they became like shooting stars with fiery tails. And this comet was not going to burn up before it hit Dorrow. Their fists crossed one

another.

Dorrow's fist pounded Ace's face. The impact was strong enough to make a sound, and Ace's jaw clenched. His legs quavered. But...

"I really... don't... like you..."

It was Dorrow who collapsed. He had taken a ferocious punch to his own jaw.

"That's funny... I

was just thinking the same thing," said Ace to the unconscious officer. Then he faltered. I rushed to offer him support. Moments ago Ace had been giving me his shoulder, and now the roles were reversed.

"You took down a Navy vice admiral. That's impressive."

"Who, that guy? Nothing to brag about..." Ace smiled, panting

heavily.

"Let's get back to the ship before the Navy surrounds it," I urged, but Ace looked hesitant.

The blaze was already dying down around us. Fairly soon, the slums would be back to their regular state.

The only thing that *wouldn't* be able to stay the same was Isuka.

When Dorrow had chosen to fight Ace, he'd

thrown aside the coat with the word “Justice” emblazoned upon it.

And Isuka had rushed to save the lives of the children, bearing that word herself.

That was her answer.

Under ordinary circumstances, no one could be more suited for the Navy than her. But now her reality was a little different. Perhaps

there was no place for her in the Navy, I thought. Her entire reason for enlisting had just crumbled into dust around her.

She'd been betrayed by what she believed in, and she slumped onto her knees in absolute dejection, her head hanging down. We couldn't just leave her in this state.

"Isuka... come and

stay on my ship!” Ace offered suddenly. “I’m not going to make you into a pirate, of course. You can be a bounty hunter. You’re tough, and the job’s just right for you, isn’t it? Then you can keep chasing after me. And we’ll be on the same ship.”

Ace reached his hand out to her. Isuka wiped her tears, sniffled, and smiled.

“You idiot… Why would a bounty hunter and her target join hands, Fire Fist?”

“Good point,” Ace grinned. Instead, he clenched his hand shut. “Let’s go.”

The three of us rushed off through the town of floating bubbles.

There was already a huge gang of Naval ships in the port and out at sea. They’d come here

to prevent us from leaving. The Navy was prepared to stop Ace from reaching the New World at any cost, apparently.

We slipped through the backstreets, evading the Navy's eyes, and ran this way and that all over the islands. I never expected that Ace's habit of wandering around eating would come in so handy - he was much

more familiar with the routes, and was able to steer us around the more public areas.

We had to get back to the ship, and quick.

If they were setting off from shore now, we probably weren't going to get back in time. But if the ship waited too long to set sail, the Naval fleet would surround us as soon as we got out to sea. In

order for the crew to escape, the ship needed to be ready for its voyage and pushing off at this moment.

But neither Ace nor I were worried at all. We both had full faith that the Spade Pirates would have the ship on the move already. That's why we didn't head for the place where it had gotten its coating. The ship would no longer be

there. If it was, there was no saving us either way.

That left us to determine what the ship's destination would be. Where could we actually get on deck?

"There's a little cape just ahead. That's gotta be it!"

"Yep!"

We were certain of it. For one thing, it was the very spot on Skull's

map where he'd put the skull mark.

We pushed our way through the bushes and out into the open. The cape was just ahead. And the ship...

The only thing before us was empty blue sea. But only for a moment.

"Captain Ace!"

"You're late, Ace!"

Then the ship was there, cheers sounding

from the deck. Our crewmates had already started it sailing ahead of time.

"Hurry, Boss, get on!" Skull said, waving and signaling. There was no time to stop - he was telling us to run and jump. I got a good head of steam and leapt over the edge to the ship.

"C'mon, Ace!"

The ship continued without slowing down.

If it broke pace even a little bit, the Navy would catch up.

"All right. Let's go, Isuka," Ace said, and leapt.

But only Ace.

His eyes bulged. "Why...?!" Isuka was still standing at the top of the cape.

"I'm still a Naval ensign... I cannot go with you," she said, smiling weakly, standing

alone at the edge of the land.

"How come?!" Ace demanded. He leaned against the railing of the ship he'd just jumped to, but the distance between the ship and the land was widening now.

"Don't die out there, Ace. Thank you."

He and Isuka were getting farther and farther apart. The ship wasn't stopping. It

couldn’t.

“Should I have grabbed her hand?” he muttered to himself, hanging his head. “But I couldn’t… I can’t hold her hand. Not when I’m a pirate, and anyway it turns into fire…”

He tugged his hat low over his eyes.

“Ace… pal…”

I couldn’t find any other words to say.

There were times,

now and then, that Ace seemed to believe he couldn't be loved. And when that mood struck him, a dark shadow passed over his face.

But I was sure that Isuka didn't feel that way about him.

And it wasn't just Isuka.

Ace simply couldn't figure it out.
He was like the sun.

Everyone looked

up to Ace. Even our enemies had a grudging respect for him. Ace was at the center of everyone and everything. But because the sun was too bright, it was always alone. No one could get too close to him. If you stood too close, you were likely to burn up.

Ace was the one who made this place for us. But could you claim the reverse? Were we

part of a place that Ace could call home? In the New World ahead, would we find a place for Ace to be himself and be at peace?

The answer wasn't clear yet. All we could do was keep moving forward.

The Naval fleet was already pushing into view.

Cannonballs roared down upon us as they

struck the sea. Plumes of water burst upward, collapsed, then reappeared. Spray splashed down on the deck like rain.

There was more roaring - but this wasn't from a cannonball.

Ace's flaming fist carved the way for us.

"Let's go, gang!" he called out, loud enough for everyone on deck to hear him. The farewells

didn’t matter now. Ace was the ship’s captain, and he needed to keep fighting.

Pulling away from our Navy pursuers, the ship rushed headlong for the bottom of the sea, where Fish-Man Island awaited us. Once the sunlight from the surface no longer penetrated the water, we were left in a state of darkness.

In the depths of the

ocean where the sun couldn't reach, Ace burned with ambition.

His destination was the New World. His target: Whitebeard.

The man who was closer than anyone to the One Piece.

Slowly the ship sank, deeper and deeper into the darkness.